



Shelton, S. Z. (2022). Barely holding on: Being a graduate student in the pandemic times of COVID-19. *Workplace*, 32, 36-48.

SAMUEL Z. SHELTON

### **BARELY HOLDING ON: BEING A GRADUATE STUDENT IN THE PANDEMIC TIMES OF COVID-19**

A really common response to graduate students is that ‘We’re all struggling right now,’ and that’s very true... It’s very different to struggle when you make a six-figure salary versus when you make \$20,000 a year, which is my guaranteed stipend rate. It’s very different to struggle when you don’t have the three months of savings that every financial adviser says that you should have.

– Anna Meier (cited in Zahneis 2020)

In this paper, I address the urgency of transforming practices of care, which are often invisibilized and constantly undervalued in institutions of higher education, in order to better meet the physical, mental, emotional, and other needs of graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, I use my personal experiences, interactions with other graduate students, and news reports to describe some of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic is negatively impacting the experiences and needs of graduate students as well as the additional labor expectations being placed on us, by our programs, departments, and institutions and by other students who are struggling to keep themselves afloat amid the chaotic waters of this historical moment. Following this analysis, I examine several transformative, care-centered pathways which allow for the expression of a “pandemic solidarity” towards wholeness, collective access, and collective liberation. I borrow these principles from the framework / movement of disability justice (Sins Invalid 2016). They are vital because the ongoing labor of pandemic solidarity can only be meaningful and worthwhile if the people most affected are centered in our response to it. My purpose in writing this discussion paper is to call attention to the current state of affairs for many U.S. graduate students and to suggest ways that we might collectively imagine different worlds for ourselves, both within and beyond the academy.

Since the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, I have transitioned from teaching moderately sized, in-person classes to teaching much larger and more time-consuming online classes. As a graduate student, I have been privileged to retain my teaching assistantship in a time when many educators/educational programs are being discarded by their hemorrhaging institutions (Kwon 2020). Among the first people to experience the workplace effects of the pandemic in higher education were graduate students and contingent faculty, many of whom are now unemployed and struggling to get by. People of color, international students, women, queer and trans people, and disabled folks in particular have been disproportionately impacted, largely due to their already precarious positions within neoliberal colleges and universities (Pettit 2020; Weissman 2020). For those of us who have retained positions at our institutions or succeeded in finding new institutional homes, circumstances may be better, but remain problematic as we are exposed to worsened/ing forms of neoliberal, capitalist exploitation, isolation from support systems, emergent obstacles to degree completion, and unexpected responsibilities in our lives (e.g. protecting and caring for sick or immunocompromised family members). Balancing the weight of a drastically shifted reality, many graduate teaching assistants have been struggling to make it through.

Due to the hierarchical, bureaucratic, and neoliberal(izing)<sup>1</sup> systems and structures of higher education (Giroux 2010), graduate students as a subordinated social group hold precarious institutional positions and can expect to find ourselves ordinarily on the negative end of disempowering relationships, especially with administrators and faculty. Furthermore, the neoliberal expectation of production-based competition that continues to permeate many academic cultures in the U.S. – e.g., who can get the most papers published, present at the most conferences, do the most research – often hinders graduate students from joining together in solidarity toward our shared elevation. The structural and relational vulnerability experienced by U.S. graduate students has been greatly exacerbated since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic during this past year. Institutions are stripping funding from departments and programs while simultaneously expecting additional labor of them, particularly those in the humanities that promote creativity, critical thinking, and social justice. Departments and programs are putting essential classes on hold, reducing space for new students, and withdrawing needed supports from current students. Moreover, the mass layoffs of adjuncts and other contingent faculty, including graduate teaching assistants, has resulted in significant destabilizations of the academic workforce, which has disproportionately harmed disabled folks, people of color, women, queer and trans people, and other marginalized academics.

Meanwhile, prospective and current graduate students alike are confronting unprecedented barriers to our academic success, such as restrictions to research/field work and the intellectual labor of adjusting to suddenly remote learning spaces. Faculty, who are also stretched thin during these pandemic times, are less available to provide much needed guidance and support. Graduate students today simply could not have predicted the incredible impacts of the pandemic, nor could we have fully prepared ourselves for what has been required of us to merely survive and get through this historical moment – a moment which has grown longer and longer under the overwhelmingly violent and oppressive management of the politically conservative Trump administration. Graduate students with teaching assistantships are by and large being required to take on more work, both in terms of the labor needed to fulfill our teaching appointments and in terms of having to seek additional employment opportunities to afford basic needs like housing. For even though an increasing number of people are experiencing financial instability, loss/reduction of income, and poverty, pandemic times continue to be profitable and profit-driven with corporations like Amazon reporting unreasonable and unjust financial gains (Weise 2021). Few things are more illustrative of the corruption of capitalism than the co-existence of obscenely hoarded wealth and suffocating, shivering, starving poverty.

Pandemic times are devastating and sorrowful and frightening for many reasons; they have been times of immeasurable loss and betrayal that have shown even more fully than before just how much people need one another, and just how often we turn against one another by choosing greed above humanity. Yet, in the wake of this ongoing tragedy and suffering, the urgency of care as an anti-capitalist, political practice has become startlingly apparent and incited activists and organizers across the country. Hedva (2016), exploring the harmful relationship between capitalism and sickness/wellness, writes that “[t]he most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other’s vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it.” The global pandemic has undoubtedly taken much and, under conservative authoritarian governments, been empowered to abruptly terminate hundreds of thousands of lives, yet it has also created an extraordinary moment in which to transform our practices of care, which form a crucial foundation for communities and society itself (The Care Collective 2020). I define transformative care as substantive acts of love, kindness, and solidarity meant to dismantle precarity and oppression, fulfill needs, and promote mutual well-being. Graduate school is a place sorely in need of this kind of care-full transformation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism refers to an ideology of free-market capitalism centering productivity, standardization, and self-discipline/regulation. It emerged in the U.S. and elsewhere in response to social movements of the 60s and 70s as a means of dismantling the welfare state and restoring power to corporations and to the wealthy (Duggan 2003).

## PANDEMIC WORLDS: THE NEW NORMAL FOR GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Campus closures have moved graduate courses online and reduced access to vital resources. Many are taking virtual classes for the first time, and group discussions, often central to graduate classes, are difficult to recreate via video. Campuses provide a plethora of resources not virtually accessible. Students may not have access to computers, reliable internet, software, or equipment. This physical barrier is likely to inhibit coursework and/or research progress. Mentorship and advising is difficult due to new constraints on professors' time, including juggling the many needs of their undergraduate students. And, many universities have not given graduate students the options of pass/fail, late withdrawals, or tuition refunds. Graduate students are simultaneously adapting to virtual teaching. TAs do not get faculty benefits but are expected to share the same burdens.

– Gatewood and McDonald (2020)

Pandemic times have greatly affected the lives of graduate students throughout the world by imposing difficult-to-surpass obstacles that have obstructed us from doing the intellectual, socio-emotional, and relational work of graduate school. Graduate students today could not have predicted the extreme impacts pandemic times would have on virtually every aspect of our schooling, from our programs of study to our dissertation projects to our job prospects following graduation. As Kathryn Kozak (2020) puts it, “Nobody signed up for this. This was not in the fine print when we became students.” Consequently, many of us are now in situations for which we were underprepared that have greatly increased the difficulties of advancing through our programs in a timely manner, and these circumstances are made more complicated and overwhelming because educational institutions are fumbling or backtracking in their responses to the pandemic (Whitford 2020). The labor of survival and the labor of claiming space in unwelcoming, elitist, often hostile academic worlds become much more exhausting in the absence of transparency or confidence, which many institutions are currently failing to inspire. Those of who have managed to continue have often found strength and support in one another because in many places throughout the United States, educational institutions have not been reliable and often acted for their own profit rather than in students' interests.

The outcomes of the pandemic have been deep and diverse for graduate students; it has made it harder for many of us to consistently meet our varied needs, and it has also created new needs for many of us that we have had to find creative ways of fulfilling. The list of points below briefly describes some common effects the pandemic has had on graduate students. This list is not meant to be comprehensive but illustrative:

- Financial: more graduate students are needing to work multiple jobs because of lost/reduced income; essential funding opportunities, like scholarships or grants, are harder to come by and more competitive; staggering medical expenses due to illness / hospitalization (and a for-profit healthcare system) are becoming more widespread and burdensome; affording basic needs like housing and food is more difficult (Stinard-Kiel 2020; Zahneis 2020; Zahneis and June 2020).
- Academic: completing programs of study is harder due to cancelled and delayed classes; field work and other sorts of research have been restricted or stopped; remote/online learning takes time and energy to get a hang of and is oftentimes not crafted with accessibility or kindness in mind; intellectual and communal spaces like libraries have new restrictions in place (Zahneis 2020; Zahneis and June 2020).
- Social: networking and forming meaningful relationships takes more energy; traditional spaces for relationship-building, such as conferences, have been cancelled, postponed, and/or moved online; cohort and department/program gatherings are less common and take more energy to set-up and participate in; friendships and collaborations may be harder to sustain.
- Familial: graduate students may need to spend more time caring for family members (e.g. bringing medicine/groceries to parents, organizing vaccination trips); safe and affordable childcare has become more difficult to find and many schools are partially

or entirely online, so children are home more often; many graduate students have been isolated with abusive/harmful family members (RGS 2020).

- **Mental/Emotional:** delays in academic progress, research goals, publications, etc. can result in worsened self-esteem; feelings of belonging that counteract “imposter syndrome” may take more effort to cultivate; fear, depression, and isolation can hinder movement, leading to doubt about one’s competency and the significance of their ideas or their potential (Langin 2020; Woolston 2020; Zahneis and June 2020).
- **Community:** many graduate students are spending time in service to their communities (e.g. taking part in mutual aid movements and protests); many communities are less available or accessible (e.g. for interviews or participatory research); vital community resources and spaces have been closed or defunded, meaning graduate students have less support.
- **Career:** the future of academic job markets is more uncertain than it has been in a long time; isolation and distancing from professional networks may greatly impact graduate students’ careers (e.g., in terms of letters, knowledge about research opportunities, etc.); graduate students are now competing for jobs, fellowships, etc. with a significant amount of other often more established academics, which puts more pressure on us to perform (Cassuto 2020; Haas et al. 2020; Kelsky 2020).

I have separated these needs out for clarity, but they are in reality deeply interconnected. For instance, the loss/reduction of income makes it harder for graduate students to live away from their families, which means that many have been forced to move back into households that negatively influence their safety and/or mental well-being. Similarly, barriers to connecting and spending time with friends and chosen family members can reduce opportunities for meeting mental and emotional needs like belonging and self-esteem. And the community-based impacts of the pandemic, such as restrictions placed on public spaces like libraries, means that some graduate students are more dependent on family members for access to things like books, computers, and financial support.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that even though these impacts are felt in different ways and at different intensities by all graduate students, they are disproportionately carried by the most marginalized and vulnerable among us. Indeed, the pandemic has produced vulnerabilities across the board, but the reality is that structural inequities have guarded some students from more serious harms while leaving others exposed and with limited protection or security. Ultimately, the pandemic is not just a “natural” phenomenon: it has been socially constructed through systems of power and oppression, which means that the pain and suffering it causes is not accidental but directed towards marginalized/disadvantaged folks. The influence of systems of power and oppression comes both in the form of exposure chances (e.g. Who has the option to work from home? Who can afford to take time off work? Who has access to safe and stable housing?) and treatment/recovery options (e.g. Who has access to decent healthcare? Who can find the time and resources to get tested? Who has the easiest access to vaccinations as they become available?). Class, racial, gender, and other privileges have mitigated the harm of the pandemic for certain graduate students. For instance, normative, gendered divisions of labor have caused women to be much more impacted by online schooling because they are more often expected to assume childcare responsibilities. Similarly, White graduate students may have had to move back in with parents/family, but immigrant students have faced threats of being forced out of the country altogether (Jordan and Hartocollis 2020).

I also want to recognize that most of these impacts affecting graduate students are simultaneously affecting undergraduate students in similar, though not necessarily the same, ways, and even though the majority of resources being made available seem to be meant for undergraduates, they still need and deserve additional support. I make this point because much of the extra support undergraduates need comes from graduate students, which ends up being additional, often unrecognized labor for us when we are already stretched thin. I am not saying that graduate students should withhold care from our undergraduate students – in fact, I think providing this care is one of our chief responsibilities as emerging educators – but I do want to be clear about a few things. First, there is a power dynamic at play when departments and institutions expect us to do this additional work without compensation or recognition, especially where it becomes necessary as a result of the

failure to put students' needs first. I think here of university presidents and coaches and other officials who have retained exorbitant salaries while expecting students to pay ever-increasing tuition and while suspending programs that help students' meet basic needs, such as shelter and food.

Second, even in typical non-pandemic conditions, marginalized academics and educators, like graduate students or women, disproportionately perform care work within college and university settings. Much of the time, we do so because gendered, racialized, classed, disabled, aged, etc. discourses lead students to view us as more approachable and to assume that we are more willing and able to provide that kind of labor. For graduate students, age can be particularly relevant because students can more readily identify with our experiences and may believe that we can provide insight into theirs. Most of the time, I love that students feel so comfortable coming to me for support and guidance – it makes me feel like I am being a successful teacher and having a positive impact of their lives. At the same time, it feels like the extremely unbalanced distribution of care work has been greatly amplified during the pandemic. Many teachers are not making extra space for students' needs right now – they are going about their business as if everything were normal, and students do not feel welcome or able to go to them. What ends up happening is graduate students and other marginalized educators have to make up for this lack of kindness. Those greatly in need of care become the most expected to provide care work for others.

Finally, this increased need for care work in teaching is co-occurring with the rising need for care work in other parts of our lives and at a time of great convergence. I cannot think of another time when the boundaries between work and home life were so tough to maintain, because they are overlapping both temporally and spatially. And while I do recognize that working from home can help to provide access for many disabled folks, myself included, this further penetration of capitalism into the intimate spaces of people's lives worries me. What will academic labor look like in a post-pandemic world? Will we be able to set reasonable boundaries for ourselves, or will working from the home become an even more entrenched assumption? Will colleges and universities expect us to provide more things for ourselves, like office space and supplies, and feel less inclined to provide necessary resources or reimbursements? Again, these questions are most troublesome at the intersections of race, class, gender, and ability, for those people who are routinely excluded from the ranks of the academic elite. And, what will the post-pandemic world look like for graduate students? Will remote/online learning become standard, meaning that in-person intellectual communities will be harder to come by or more expensive?

On top of all these things, departmental and institutional policies and regulations restrict graduate students' capacity to meaningfully engage in care work with our students. The challenges we encounter are also connected to the constraints of our positions. Many graduate teaching assistants have limited or no control over the courses we instruct and limited to no power to adjust course syllabi, meaning that building access for ourselves / our students can be a lengthy, overwhelming, and at times disheartening process. Even minor tweaks can require outside approval. So, many of us are really tightly bound in terms of how we interact with students and what kinds of space we open up for them. Graduate students who are not teaching their own courses (e.g., whose main work is grading for another instructor) may be especially limited depending on how much leeway the instructor of record grants them regarding grading policies, attendance, and such. While freeing for some, the inability to support students for these reasons can carry a profound emotional toll on any graduate students who feel stuck or powerless to meaningfully respond to the current situation.

In addition to restrictive policies and regulations, the broader effects of the pandemic have made care work more challenging to take on for several reasons. The labor of teaching during pandemic times is both quantitatively and qualitatively different. In addition to teaching different amounts and kinds of students, many graduate teaching assistants are also having to pursue the knowledge and skills needed to teach in different contexts (e.g. online or remote courses). Relatively few graduate programs provide meaningful opportunities to learn about pedagogy, let alone in diverse learning contexts; much of the time, graduate students are expected to learn how to teach through observation or by being thrown into a classroom. Learning to teach online / remote classes with care takes time and experience, and showing up for students in a meaningful way can be especially tricky when you only connect with them through email or Zoom. Graduate students that have not themselves taken online courses typically lack models for this form of interaction and have to take on the additional labor of figuring it out for themselves. Plus, many of the students coming into

our classes are inexperienced with online or remote learning, which means that they need guidance for how to be successful in these spaces as well.

Despite the multitude of obstacles presented by the pandemic, many graduate students cannot afford to leave teaching assistantships because doing so may increase the costs of graduate education to the point of becoming insurmountable, and many of us do not want to leave. My love of teaching is what keeps me in graduate school and what brought me here in the first place. Further, we need all the teaching experience we can get if we want any chance at a job following graduation. Widespread layoffs of faculty and staff across the country means graduates are at a serious disadvantage. What would be most helpful for me and many other graduate students is for departments and institutions to actively work to eliminate the obstacles to continuing in graduate school and to generate opportunities for us to rest, recover, and heal during this exhausting time. Redistributions of labor would be especially helpful, and I think greater attention to the workload being expected of graduate students is urgent. What was a reasonable workload before is, in many cases, unreasonable now, and what was unreasonable but still expected of graduate students before should have been reimagined a long time ago. In the following section, I propose based on my experience and investigation three starting points for addressing these concerns.

#### CRISIS RESPONSE:

##### INTERDEPENDENCE, MUTUAL AID, AND TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES OF CARE

The contexts, expectations, and norms of higher education continue to shift as the pandemic evolves, and graduate students are keenly feeling the weight of often dangerous, irresponsible, and profit-driven institutional decisions and policies. Even as the promise of widespread vaccine distribution makes the end of the pandemic seem imaginable, we are collectively (though certainly not equally) living through a time of uncertainty, fear, and loss. The sad fact remains that across the country, neoliberal institutions of higher education are continuing to choose profit and productivity over the safety and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. From refusing to refund money to students wanting to move out of dorms early for their safety, to waiting to move classes online until after the refund period for dropped classes, numerous colleges and universities have prioritized their own capitalist interest. And, they are engaging in these harmful acts while simultaneously laying off contingent faculty en masse, suspending / gutting humanities and social justice programs, and withholding funding for student support and research. As usual, graduate students are disproportionately impacted by these decisions, especially those of us who occupy other marginalized and disadvantaged social positions. If we are going to make it through this, then we must find ways of lifting each other up in solidarity.

These times make it urgent for graduate schools and programs to move away from competition-based models of education - harmful, divisive models based in neoliberal capitalist logics conditioning people to accept as normal the problematic notion that learning is facilitated by rivalry and opposition instead of cooperation and collaborative problem-solving. These models fail because they instruct students to become overly focused on scarcity during a time when many of us have already lost so much and had much stolen away from us. In place of competition, graduate students are more empowered to survive through the pandemic when we are part of learning communities and institutions that actively promote *interdependence*, *mutual aid*, and *transformative practices of care*, which are the three organizing pieces of this section of my paper. Dismantling White supremacy, ableism, cis-heteropatriarchy, and capitalism may seem an impossible task in this difficult moment when many of us are struggling to get from one day to the next, but participating in these collectivist practices changes the conditions of our co-existence from prolonged opposition to cooperative forms of togetherness. The precarity graduate students are currently facing is overwhelming and oppressive, and so this moment must become one in which everyone in higher education actively experiments with different methods of practicing care and building access.

Before entering into longer discussions of interdependence, mutual aid, and transformative practices of care, I want to recognize that this work is not new because marginalized and oppressed people have been struggling and organizing against crisis for as long as inequity and injustice have been in existence. Even now, as we face down a deadly virus with the destructive capacity to wound all peoples, systems of power are operating in full force to ensure that people of color, queer and trans folk, disabled and sick peoples, women, and poor

and homeless people, among others, are bearing the brunt of the harm. The pandemic is as much a political event as a biological one if not even more so. As such, it is disproportionately marginalized and oppressed peoples who have been leading movements to protect and care for their communities and to hold more advantaged people accountable. This fact is true in community spaces and institutions of higher education. Graduate students, who are typically expected to live with a high degree of institutional vulnerability, have been organizing across the country to protect ourselves and to hold our departments and administrations accountable.

### *1. Deepening Interdependence*

With disability justice, we want to move away from the “myth of independence,” that everyone can and should be able to do everything on their own. I am not fighting for independence, as much of the disability rights movement rallies behind. I am fighting for an interdependence that embraces need and tells the truth: no one does it on their own and the myth of independence is just that, a myth.

– Mia Mingus (2011)

Being at such a formative stage in our intellectual and professional growth and being so bound to the evaluation of people holding institutional and disciplinary power over us, graduate students are often especially susceptible to manipulation, exploitation, and abuse by faculty and institutions (Marie 2019). It’s easy enough to find stories of graduate students being mistreated or neglected by our advisors and committees, frequently to a point of mental / emotional distress and sometimes even severely enough for us to drop out of graduate school altogether. The drastic changes ushered in by pandemic times have worsened the situation for many graduate students who must now figure out how to stay afloat despite diminished opportunities for research and teaching appointments, less accessible and attentive advisors and mentors who are also now overburdened with additional responsibilities / insecurities, and reduced community spaces from which to gather support or motivation. Mandates for physical distancing have isolated many graduate students from our intellectual communities, both in terms of geography/physical space and in terms of our relationships, which can lead to lowered self-esteem and also nagging questions of belonging. A crucial solution to this problem of isolation is for mentors/professors, departments, and institutions to engage in actions that deepen *interdependence*.

Interdependence is an anti-ableist, anti-capitalist concept that describes the importance of recognizing how life sustains life. No matter who we are or which social positions we occupy, all of us depend on other peoples and living beings to promote our survival and wellness, just as they depend upon us to care for their needs in interconnected ways (Mingus 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). For most people, existing outside of community is not possible because mutually beneficial relationships provide a nourishing foundation from which to live meaningful and pleasurable lives. Interdependence inverts the myth of independence, which is a White supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, ableist, and capitalist falsehood that perpetuates an oppressive belief that power and control over resources come from individual “character” and “hard work” rather than the often unacknowledged and rarely compensated labor of others. Interdependence offers a different narrative – namely, that what individual people are able to achieve depends on their relationships, both visible and invisibilized. Humans accomplish great things through collaboration and compassion, and those of us surviving the pandemic have been able to do so because of the support/kindness of those around us. The pathways we have found to continue to pursue our goals and grow as individuals were created, in part, by the guidance and direction we received from our relationships.

From my perspective as both an educator and student, one of the most beneficial ways to conceive of graduate school is as an advanced intellectual space wherein students can become splendidly enmeshed in histories and networks of thought, both as receivers of past wisdom and curators of new knowledge. This enmeshment is a particular kind of interdependence: students become capable of participating in the creation, reorganization, and application of knowledge and understanding as they come to inhabit new mental spaces made possible through their relationships and connections. Cohorts or other kinds of learning communities, for instance, make it possible for students to think together in order to arrive at questions and conclusions which may be

unattainable to individual students. Moreover, conferences and other sorts of gatherings of intellectual communities are especially important for graduate students because they promote the collaborative exchange of ideas – because they enable us to more fully share in and contribute to each other’s growth. And in a broader sense, the questions we are able to ask and the knowledge we are able to seek depends on developing relationships to the ideas and beliefs of past theorists.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has interrupted much of what makes graduate school such a wonderful place for deepening interdependence, due to the many impacts I described in first section of this paper.<sup>2</sup> The reality is that many graduate students are more disconnected from our mentors/professors, departments, and institutions that we have even been, and many of us who are experiencing this disconnection are also struggling to overcome it. Deepening interdependence is a compassionate, relational approach to supporting graduate students that centers the restoration of connection as a meaningful tool of combatting distancing and isolation. Within this approach, the guiding question for supporting students becomes: “How can we tap into the generative power of relationships when safety mandates that we keep space between us?” Put another way: “How do we nurture and sustain mutually beneficial connections when we are not in the same physical spaces?” Accordingly, while many of the resources made available to students since the pandemic began have centered around academic success and mental wellness, here is a means for addressing the relational harms of the pandemic, which are often overlooked. Relational harms of the pandemic have caused isolation, feelings of unbelonging, disrupted support systems, and other kinds of disconnection.

Deepening interdependence for graduate students amid the pandemic might take many forms. I would argue, however, that the specific method is not as important as the effort put into it. I believe students, myself included, respond more to the active demonstration of a commitment to care than to whatever the act itself actually is. At the same time, receptiveness is key because interdependence can only exist where listening and reciprocity are readily accessible. The list below contains several examples of what deepening interdependence can look like in practice, although there are certainly more. Which method is most effective depends on the specific context, such as individual’ and community’ needs. For any institution, deepening interdependence might simply start with asking graduate students how we are doing and listening to our needs, but the list below provides some additional ideas:

- Seeking out and sharing opportunities for collaborative scholarship; actively engaging with and showing interest in the work of graduate students; helping students submit proposals and showing up for our presentations; helping us to connect with other scholars in our chosen field.
- Hosting virtual coffee hours or other events for graduate students to catch up; sharing the activities and accomplishments of graduate students on a listserv; creating virtual community spaces where graduate students can ask questions, get support, and build community.
- Check-in with graduate students regularly, both about our scholarship/academics and our lives in general; show enthusiasm and interest in what we are doing; listen to our needs and put effort into helping us fulfill them; make resources and support more accessible (Cassuto 2020).
- Find ways of reducing unreasonable workloads, so that graduate students have more time for rest and to connect or spend time with others; recognize us for the hard work that we do and show us how and why we are important to the department/institution.

---

<sup>2</sup> I want also to recognize that the pandemic has opened up opportunities for interdependence and that many people have been doing important work to build tools and spaces for connection even with mandates for physical distancing. For instance, moving conferences online has limited connections in some ways, and it has also introduced a bunch of new tools that allow people to be present when they otherwise might not have been able to participate. It is important to be aware of the overall impact of such transitions and to recognize that they have positive and negative impacts.

- Counteract isolation by making an effort to involve us; make space for us to show up in ways that are both meaningful and accessible to us; show kindness and patience if/when we struggle to complete tasks efficiently or make mistakes.

## 2. *Mutual Aid During a Pandemic*

Mutual aid comes from communist and anarchist theory and from everyday praxes of survival. The close association between mutual aid and disasters makes it a natural fit for teaching in a pandemic, because extreme circumstances reveal existing gaps and exclusions in social safety networks.

–jackson, Stewart-Taylor, and Wieland (2020)

Transnational protests in support of Black Lives Matter, the widespread organizing efforts against the supremacist violence of the conservative Trump administration, the Indigenous-led defense to protect land and water throughout the occupied lands of North America – all of these sites of resistance were made possible and sustained through a practice of *mutual aid*. Mutual aid is an anti-capitalist framework through which we can provide for one another's needs collectively without relying on carceral systems, labor markets, or other tools and metrics of neoliberal state governance (Spade 2020). It is a creative, compassionate, and liberatory method of sustaining the life of people in our communities, particularly those who have been most impacted by systems of power designed against their survival and well-being (Spade 2020). It is grounded in the difficult recognition that systems and structures set up to inflict harm and unfairly distribute life chances can never be the source of our collective empowerment / liberation, and so we must together learn how to lift one another up and protect each other from violence and harm. Mutual aid is particularly urgent during pandemic times when so many of us are struggling to meet basic needs, such as access to decent housing and sustenance.

From a disability justice lens, mutual aid could be defined as an ongoing process of building collective access by dismantling inequities and injustices that prevent people from being present in public spaces and living worthwhile lives without suffering. Importantly, engaging in mutual aid does not mean that activists stop organizing to hold individuals, institutions, or the state accountable for harms they cause; to the contrary, mutual aid is about accepting collective responsibility for the survival of people in our communities and working to reduce harm against them both in the immediate moment and long-term. In my experience, getting into the mindset and habit of mutual aid is essential to the process of building spaces and worlds in which consent, accountability, interdependence, honesty, access, and reciprocal well-being are honored and prioritized. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 41) maintains that mutual aid is based on the idea of “solidarity not charity” because “[m]utual aid, as opposed to charity, does not connote moral superiority of the giver over the receiver.” Further, Taylor and Hunt-Hendrix (2019) explain that solidarity “is a form of reciprocity rooted in the acknowledgment that our lives are intertwined.” Mutual aid organizers take interdependence as a given and work outward from that base understanding.

For marginalized and oppressed students in graduate school, mutual aid has been around for a long time. Even before the pandemic, we traded textbooks to reduce expenses, brought each other food during comps, subbed for each other's classes, and offered up our floors and couches when rent went past due before stipends came in. Now, over a year into the pandemic, mutual aid is more necessary than ever before, and graduate students are coming up with creative and meaningful ways to watch out for one another. From eviction blockades, community-based fundraisers, and resource pooling to safety planning with graduate students trapped in unsafe households, mutual aid is alive and well among us. But that does not mean everyone is being held up: many graduate students, especially disabled graduate students, have fallen through the cracks or been left behind by our communities. Oftentimes, leaving people behind has to do with internalized dominance / oppression that marks certain peoples as disposable, and sometimes it also has to do with us not really knowing how to give support across difference. Mutual aid networks are not perfect, and we can all do better in terms of showing up for the people around us. Nevertheless, they are absolutely essential

In relation to mutual aid, the task for educators seeking to practice solidarity with graduate students is two-fold. First, educators should seek to promote knowledge, understanding, and opportunities for mutual aid. Doing so might mean teaching about historical/contemporary practices of mutual aid, particularly in relation to social justice movements like Black Lives Matter. It might also mean helping students to unlearn the myths

of capitalism, such as that people with unmet needs deserve to suffer because they are lazy or bad. I find that talking about the specific needs of the community and strategizing for how to meet those needs can really have a big impact, and it demonstrates to students what an anti-capitalist practice of care might look like. Second, educators should aim to increase access to shareable resources that graduate students are most in need of while also working to remove the barriers to meeting our needs. What this task ultimately entails is pressuring departments/institutions to center students' needs above profit and to commit to advocating for our well-being – to show up for us so that we might show up for each other.

A significant question to consider right now is, “What does mutual aid look like during pandemic times?” It can be difficult to figure out how to safely and effectively do mutual aid work when our shared well-being depends on us keeping six feet apart from other people. But during these pandemic times, when physical distancing is so vital for our collective survival and well-being, the practice of mutual aid urges us to imagine methods of caring for and protecting one another without causing further harm through exposure. This effort is particularly crucial for practicing solidarity with disabled people, who not only may be more susceptible to the harms of the virus but also may have a harder time accessing resources and connections outside of intimate relationships. Mutual aid helps to prevent or reduce dependence on harmful relationships; it a tool of harm reduction. The list below includes some starting points for mutual aid organizing at colleges / universities during the pandemic, especially for faculty and administrators:

- Actively foster spaces and opportunities for connection and communication, especially where the pandemic has yielded isolation; encourage students to talk about their needs and figure out what is necessary to make them feel safe and welcome to do so.
- Collect and share stories about mutual aid networks and movements on college and university campuses; promote collective conversations about the urgency and practice of mutual aid and focus on naming how the systems in place around us were not designed to sustain us.
- Engage with graduate students to figure out how you can best support our changing needs; work with institutions to open up and/or expand access to resources; teach students how to navigate the system to our benefit; challenge irresponsible institutional decisions and policies.
- Set up spaces for mutual aid practices to take place, such as websites that graduate students control and can contribute resources to; lift restrictions on how funding can be used so that we might apply it towards our most pressing needs, like rent (Zahneis 2020).
- Increase graduate teaching assistants' capacities to support the students in our classes; help us find resources to share with students; welcome us to implement or try out methods for making remote teaching more accessible and caring.

### ***3. Transformative Practices of Care***

Graduate school is not straightforward or logical; it is for many students a mysterious, unpredictable, potentially queer space of self-discovery in which we are exposed to ideas, theories, and experiences that lead us to differently understand and possibly even transform the boundaries of who we are/who we want to become. From my perspective as a graduate student in the humanities, the best graduate school programs create opportunities for authentic personal and intellectual transformation to occur naturally – they invite students into deep exploration and contemplation that push against the boundaries of belief, knowledge, and understanding to generate an intellectual openness grounded in empathy and critical thinking. Cultivating such openness requires a sustained practice of care through which students become capable of venturing forth into feelings / spaces of discomfort and unfamiliarity. However, few graduate programs are able to realize this vision, especially during pandemic times. Unfortunate as it is to write, graduate school is oftentimes a hostile place organized against the expression and practice of care. For many graduate students, earning the recognition needed to advance through our programs requires maintaining a problematic illusion of independence and self-sufficiency that shows just how well we can get along without care from others, including and especially faculty members. The performance of independence in turn validates neoliberal capitalism.

Surviving academia, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged students endeavoring to become scholars, is not just a matter of the quality of our intellectual work – our successfulness depends largely on our ability to form collaborative networks and convince others to invest themselves in us. In other words, being a graduate student is in many ways an ongoing exercise in care work, specifically the work of proving that we are deserving of care from our cohorts, our professors, and our institutions. My own experiences as well as my interactions with other graduate students have helped me to recognize that many of us struggle to make it through graduate school because, in addition to the complex, intellectual work of our fields/disciplines, we are also expected to undergo a hidden curriculum of socioemotional learning and proving that more advantaged students are excused from. This kind of care work, of proving that we are deserving of care, is hard enough outside of pandemic times, but how can we earn respect and get others to care about us when sustaining connections with them at all is so much more difficult and exhausting? Part of the work of practicing solidarity with graduate students right now is actively extending care to us, especially those of us who are marginalized or disadvantaged in academia.

Beyond the necessary, typically uncompensated reproduction of labor and the illusion of philanthropy needed to mask its obsession with worker exploitation and production, care exists outside the normal functioning of capitalism (Hedva 2016; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Transformative practices of care are anti-capitalist because they emerge from an understanding that productivity and ownership do not determine which people are deserving of aid, support, friendship, and compassion, even if capitalism urges us to believe that they do. Put another way, practices of care become transformative when they empower us to imagine and do the work of building alternative modes of togetherness that exceed the restrictive borders imposed upon us by systems of power and oppression. For instance, instead of merely helping people keep up their productivity in an oppressive and exhausting work environment, a transformative practice of care would seek to address the sources of exhaustion in order to dismantle exploitation and establish more equitable and egalitarian environments. For graduate students during the pandemic, doing so might look like any of the items on the list at the end of this subsection.

As with interdependence and mutual aid, pandemic times offer us a unique opportunity to collectively imagine, talk about, and enact transformative practices of care with and between graduate students in ways that counter the harmful impacts of distancing and isolation. The concern right now is not just about how much care is being expressed, but also what forms care takes and where it comes from. That is, those seeking to practice solidarity have to ask themselves, “How does care become transformational during pandemic times? Where is care most impactful in this moment? How can we direct care towards the most impacted students?” As with interdependence and mutual aid, care starts with active listening because it should always be practiced with the consent and active involvement of those it is directed towards. Following from this tenet, I define transformative care as substantive acts of love, kindness, and solidarity meant to dismantle precarity and oppression, fulfill needs, and promote well-being. This definition is deliberately broad because transformative care is not reducible to a standard set of actions; rather, it is many different things in many different contexts depending on the unique experiences and needs of the people involved. What matters is the intention of the person/people offering it and the impacts it has on the person/people receiving it.

- Supporting the efforts of graduate student unions and encouraging students to participate in their unions; listening to and advocating for students’ needs; holding teachers accountable for their interactions with students and sharing strategies for caring student support.
- Revising departmental policies to make greater space for flexibility and kindness, both within graduate student-faculty relationships and in the expectations and responsibilities placed on graduate students; involving students in the revision of such policies.
- Centering accessibility throughout departments / programs; engaging faculty in conversations and training about accessibility as well as social justice frameworks, especially disability justice; working with graduate students to figure out what accessibility looks like during a pandemic.

- Structuring courses, particularly workloads, teaching methods, and learning requirements, in ways that recognize the ongoing impacts of the pandemic; working with students to determine what learning is possible right now and how to most effectively pursue it.
- Advocate for greater financial support from departments and institutions; push for a summer stipend for graduate students; compensate us fairly for all the work we do (Stinard-Kiel 2020).

## CONCLUSION

There is a lot at stake right now, and how people collectively respond to the needs of these times will have lasting impacts for years to come. Graduate students across the united states are struggling to continue our educational programs because of our emerging needs and challenges to fulfilling them. This paper has explained some of the most pressing experiences and needs of graduate students right now, and it has also described some pathways that teachers and institutions might pursue to better support and care for graduate students. Deepening interdependence, mutual aid, and transformative practice of care are all starting points for figuring out how we can help one another survive this pandemic and limit its negative impacts. There remains the always important question of who provides this labor, which is something that students, teachers, departments, and institutions will have to negotiate moving forward. But what matters now is recognizing that many graduate students are struggling and are uncertain about our futures. Acting from this recognition is vital to promote our survival and well-being.

## REFERENCES

- Cassuto, Leonard. "Graduate Advising in the Time of COVID-19." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/graduate-advising-in-the-time-of-covid-19/> (published April 13, 2020).
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- Gatewood, Britany, and McDonald, Emily. "Pandemic, Pandemonium, and Plight for Graduate Students." *Footnotes: A Publication of the American Sociological Association* 48, no. 3 (2020). <https://www.asanet.org/news-events/footnotes/may-jun-2020/professional-challenges-facing-sociologists/pandemic-pandemonium-and-plight-graduate-students>
- Giroux, Henry A. "Bare Pedagogy and the Scourge of Neoliberalism: Rethinking Higher Education as a Democratic Public Sphere." *The Educational Forum* (West Lafayette, Ind.) 74, no. 3 (2010): 184-96.
- Haas, Nicholas, Gureghian, Aida, Díaz, Cristel Jusino, and Williams, Abby. "Through Their Own Eyes: The Implications of COVID-19 for PhD Students." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* (2020): 1-21.
- Hedva, Johanna. "sick woman theory." *Mask Magazine*. 2016. <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.
- Jackson, Remus, Stewart-Taylor, F., and Wieland, Cara. "Disability Justice and Mutual Aid Pedagogy or: How I Learned to Keep Worrying and Teach Later On." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://activisthistory.com/2020/03/31/disability-justice-and-mutual-aid-pedagogy-or-how-i-learned-to-keep-worrying-and-teach-later-on/> (published March 31, 2020).
- Jordan, Miriam, and Hartocollis, Anemona. "U.S. Rescinds Plan to Strip Visas From International Students in Online Classes." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/us/coronavirus-international-foreign-student-visas.html> (published July 14, 2020).
- Kelsky, Karen. "The Professor Is In: Stranded on the Academic Job Market This Year?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-professor-is-in-stranded-on-the-academic-job-market-this-year/> (published April 17, 2020).
- Kozak, Kathryn. "Teaching (and Learning) in the Time of Coronavirus." *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences* 7, no. 1

- (2020): 1-5.
- Kwon, Diana. "As the Pandemic Hits Campus Finances, Faculty Face Layoffs." *The Scientist*. <https://www.the-scientist.com/news-opinion/as-the-pandemic-hits-campus-finances-faculty-face-layoffs-67611> (published June 4, 2020).
- Langin, Katie. "As the pandemic erodes grad student mental health, academics sound the alarm." *Science Magazine*. <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2020/09/pandemic-erodes-grad-student-mental-health-academics-sound-alarm> (published September 4, 2020).
- Marie, Robin. "Dodging Ashtrays: On the powerlessness of the graduate student." *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*. <https://s-usih.org/2019/03/dodging-ashtrays-on-the-powerlessness-of-the-graduate-student/> (published March 24, 2019).
- Mingus, Mia. "Changing the Framework: Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*. <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/> (published February 12, 2011).
- . "Access intimacy, interdependence and disability justice." Retrieved from *Leaving Evidence*: <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> (published April 12, 2017).
- Pettit, Emma. "Who Gets to Teach Remotely? The Decisions are Getting Personal." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-gets-to-teach-remotely-the-decisions-are-getting-personal> (published June 22, 2020).
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.
- Rackham Graduate School [RGS]. "Supporting Graduate Students During Stressful Times." *University of Michigan*. <https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/supporting-graduate-students-during-stressful-times/> (published 2020).
- Sins Invalid. "Skin, Tooth, and Bone. The Basis of Movement is Our People: A Disability Justice Primer." *Sins Invalid*, 2016.
- Spade, Dean. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. Brooklyn: Verso, 2020.
- Stinard-Kiel, Sarah. "Universities Must Save the Next Generation of Essential Workers." *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/06/30/pandemic-threatening-grad-students-and-all-they-contribute-their-universities> (published June 30, 2020).
- Taylor, Astra, and Hunt-Hendrix, Leah. "One for All: To Avert Global Catastrophe, We Urgently Need to Resurrect the Ancient Ideal of Solidarity." *The New Republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/154623/green-new-deal-solidarity-solution-climate-change-global-warming> (published August 26, 2019).
- The Care Collective [Chatzidakis, Andreas, Hakim, Jamie, Littler, Jo, Rottenberg, Catherine, and Segal, Lynne]. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. London: Verso Books, 2020.
- Weise, Karen. "Amazon's profit soars 220 percent as pandemic drives shopping online." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/technology/amazons-profits-triple.html> (published April 29, 2021).
- Weissman, Sara. "Going the Distance: COVID-19 Complicates Graduate Student Retention Efforts." *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*. <https://diverseeducation.com/article/194031/> (published October 21, 2020).
- Whitford, Emma. "August Wave of Campus Reopening Reversals." *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/12/colleges-walk-back-fall-reopening-plans-and-opt-online-only-instruction> (published August 12, 2020).
- Woolston, Chris. "Signs of depression and anxiety soar among US graduate students during pandemic." *Nature Journal*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02439-6> (published August 18, 2020).
- Zahneis, Megan. "For Many Graduate Students, Covid-19 Pandemic Highlights Inequities." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-many-graduate-students-covid-19-pandemic->

[highlights-inequities/](#) (published March 26, 2020).

Zahneis, Megan, and June, Audrey Williams. "How Has the Pandemic Affected Graduate Students? This Study Has Answers." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. [https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-graduate-students-this-study-has-answers?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-graduate-students-this-study-has-answers?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in) (published September 3, 2020).

#### AFFILIATIONS

Samuel Z. Shelton, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Oregon State University (sheltsam@oregonstate.edu)