



## **Work-Life Management Challenges for Graduate Students of Color at an HBCU During a Pandemic**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article expands the student work-life discussion to include nontraditional graduate students of color. The Afrocentric theory is used as a conceptual framework. A collaborative inquiry approach was used to capture the reflections and experiences of three urban graduate students of color matriculating at a historically Black university during a pandemic. Six themes emerged: COVID-19, ties that bind, financial responsibility, linked fate, mental and physical well-being, and student work-life management. The article concludes with implications for education, research, and policy.*

**Keywords:** Collaborative inquiry, graduate students of color, work-life balance, work-life management

## INTRODUCTION

According to Okahana and colleagues (2020), 24.8% of graduate students enrolled in the Fall 2019 semester in the United States were students of color, of which 0.50% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 12.10% Black/African American, 0.20% were Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 11.90% were Latinx individuals. Graduate students of color are often married or single with dependents, dependent on student aid for financial resources, and in need of emotional support and paid work, whether part-time or full-time (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). As these students of color seek upward mobility via higher education, they often experience distance from their communities and have to redefine themselves socially to find support (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Walsh et al., 2021). Common student work-life issues, such as addressing financial and caretaking responsibilities and taking on student loan debt, are often eclipsed by curriculum and other graduate program requirements, leaving some urban nontraditional graduate students of color feeling invisible and unsupported by their new academic community (Brus, 2006; Choy, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Graduate students who are parents report higher levels of stress related to work-family balance, as well as a general lack of support from university systems (Dolson & Deemer, 2020; Springer et al., 2009; Theisen et al., 2018).

Many nontraditional graduate students of color or those who are married, parents, caretakers, reliant upon full-time or part-time work, or rely on loans to pay for school, are often unprepared for the initial cerebral jolt that accompanies student work-life management issues and, specifically, the increase in stress associated with working, parenting, and meeting the academic demands of graduate school (Lin, 2016). Adjustments associated with the COVID-19 crisis added another layer of stress. The student work-life stressors for graduate students of color while experiencing a pandemic include increased caretaking responsibilities for children while working from home (Nodine et al., 2021), facing disproportionate deaths of loved ones as a result of COVID-19 (Fortuna et al., 2020), navigating feelings of discrimination, whether personally or vicariously (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Dolson & Deemer, 2020), safeguarding mental health (Chirikov et al., 2020), and meeting the demands of graduate school remotely.

Existing literature that specifically highlights the student work-life experiences of graduate students of color during a pandemic is limited (Walsh et al., 2021; Wan Mohd Yunus et al., 2021). This article expands the student work-life discussion to include nontraditional graduate students of color. Afrocentric theory is used as a conceptual framework. This article

emerges from a collaborative inquiry approach to capture the reflections and experiences of three urban graduate students matriculating at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) during a pandemic, thus adding voice on the discussion of student work-life for graduate students of color. The article concludes with implications for education, research, and policy.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Community as Culture**

Afrocentric theory focuses on the epistemology of people within the African diaspora (i.e., Black and people of African descent, such as African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latino) and places them at the center of analysis (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1996). Using a Black person as the center of analysis, Boyd-Franklin (1989) discussed seven levels to describe the interdependent and multisystemic levels of Black families: “individual, subsystems, family household, extended family, nonblood kin and friends, church and community resources, social services agencies and other outside systems” (p. 150). Cultural values such as communalism, interconnectedness, and spirituality had their genesis in West Africa (Bent-Goodley, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2002; McPhatter, 2016; Schiele, 1996), have survived the great Maafa (i.e., the middle passage or transatlantic slave trade; Ani, 1994), and are currently practiced among many individuals of African descent.

For many people of African descent, the interlinking of community is also psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually expressed through linked fate. Linked fate is associated with a keen sense of identification and consciousness that occurs in a given community will impact an individual of that community (Dawson, 1994; Gay & Tate, 1998; Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Simien, 2005). For people of African descent, linked fate is also associated with an extensive history of lived experiences of discrimination, oppression, systemic racism, disparities, and inequities, especially in the United States (National Urban League, 2020; Simien, 2005). This “stage of identification, whereby individuals come to see themselves as sharing a linked fate with other African American people, leads to collective action as a necessary form of resistance” (Simien, 2005, p. 530). Community serves as the ties that bind (Butler, 1992), a protective factor for many individuals of African descent, inclusive of historically Black colleges and universities and the many Black undergraduate and graduate students.

### **Work-Life Balance**

The topic of balancing work and personal life falls into multiple typologies: work-family conflict, work-family integration, and work-life

balance (Alleman et al., 2018). Work-life balance has been defined in a variety of ways. The most widely used definition is that work-life balance is “an overall appraisal of the extent to which individuals’ effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with their life values at a given point in time” (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011, p. 80). Alleman and colleagues (2018) assert that work-life balance holds three primary assumptions:

1) Family is a woman’s responsibility and work is a man’s responsibility; 2) with the increase in workplace policies addressing time flexibility, individuals can choose the way in which they engage in work; and 3) the work-life balance discussion primarily focuses on a Western Anglo-American world view and neglects the worldview of non-western cultures (p. 80).

As more parents of color seek graduate education (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018), there is a need to expand the traditional view of women being nurturers to include women as providers (Littlefield, 2003).

### **Student Work-Life Balance**

Discussion of the effects of work and life for the matriculating student has only recently begun, particularly for urban graduate students of color. From 1986 to 2004, there was an increase in the number of full-time matriculating students at 4-year universities working at least 20 hours per week (Fox et al., 2005). Specifically, in 2000, 77% of full-time matriculating students were working at least 27 hours per week (Butler, 2007). As of 2011, 82% of graduate students worked full-time (Davis, 2012). The student work-life balance literature highlights challenges and stressors, the importance of social support, practical solutions, and suggestions for the academic world (Evans et al., 2018; King and Herb, 2012).

To examine the challenges of work-life balance for women and to recognize the increased stressors with which women contend, McCutcheon and Morrison (2018) conducted a qualitative research study of 65 academic women, 32 faculty and 33 graduate students. The researchers identified three themes: masculine workplace norms, consequences of work-life balance, and choosing between work and family. Many of the participants indicated that they had to choose between academics, work, and family. One stated, “For women especially, it is difficult to even consider having a family while pursuing higher education. One should not have to choose between an academic career and having children” (McCutcheon &

Morrison, 2018, p. 241). This study also highlighted how graduate students encounter work-family conflict. One participant stated:

I do feel as if my dissertation has suffered because I had a child. I feel torn between the two, and have chosen to prioritize my child over my writing. . . . It is taking me longer to finish and I worry about time-to-completion. . . . After a full day of clinical work, spending time with my child, and household chores, I am too tired to write at night. (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2018, p. 244)

This study demonstrates that male-focused workplace cultures and the demands of academia may increase the likelihood that mothers feel like they have to choose between work, family, and pursuing their academic goals.

Wyland et al. (2013) examined the relationship between nonwork demands (i.e., school involvement) and school-work conflict and investigated the mediating effects of school-work conflict on the relation between school involvement and job performance. Wyland and colleagues (2013) used the Grzywacz and Marks's (2000) scale of work-family conflict to measure school-work conflict, and the Karasek's (1979) scale was used to assess school involvement. In the first round of surveys distributed to 339 graduate business students enrolled at a large Midwestern university, there were 171 usable responses. Based on hierarchical regression analyses, school involvement significantly and positively predicted school-work conflict. The second round involved paper-based surveys for the same population, with 54 usable responses, and incorporated supervisor-rated measures of job performance (i.e., job dedication, task performance, and interpersonal facilitation). Hierarchical regression analyses showed that schoolwork conflict negatively predicted job dedication and interpersonal facilitation and predicted task performance. Researchers also found that school-work conflict fully mediated the relation between school involvement and job dedication and task performance. The findings suggest that the level of involvement in graduate school (which may involve registering for classes, going to school meetings, participating in group projects, and applying for and participating in grant fellowships) impacts work role, work responsibilities, and interpersonal work relationships, increasing school-work conflict for the student and possibly increasing levels of stress (Wyland et al., 2013).

### **Stress and Mental Health**

The overlapping roles of provider, nurturer, and student can prove stressful to graduate students. El-Ghoroury and colleagues (2012) examined academic stressors and coping strategies for 273 psychology graduate

students. When listing stressors, more than half the sample identified academic responsibilities, finances/debt, anxiety, and poor work/school-life balance. Further, a quarter of the student participants listed an additional eight challenges: burnout/compassion fatigue; death, loss, or grief; depression; family issues; marital/relationship issues or other interpersonal issues; physical health issues; professional isolation/lack of social support; and research responsibilities (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Many participants reported that incorporating self-care activities such as exercising, social support, or mental health breaks helped decrease added stressors of work-life balance (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

In an extensive literature review on barriers and challenges of nontraditional students, Lin (2016) found that students' multiple roles lead to increased time constraints and conflicts to work and life, which create increased levels of stress and anxiety and lead to a decrease in self-confidence. Evans and colleagues (2018) surveyed 2,279 graduate students representing 26 nations and 234 institutions, with 56% studying in the humanities or social sciences and 38% studying in the biological and physical science fields. The survey, which included validated clinical scales for anxiety and depression, was distributed to students via email and social media. Among the graduate students, 41% had moderate to severe anxiety based on the GAD07 scale, compared to 6% of the general population. Additionally, 39% of participants had moderate to severe depression, compared with 6% of the general population. Among the women, 40% had anxiety and 41% were depressed, compared with 34% and 35% of men, respectively. A total of 56% of graduate students who experienced moderate to severe anxiety and 55% of those who reported depression did not agree with the statement that their "work-life balance was good." Positive support from advisors positively impacted students' emotional well-being.

Researchers have begun to examine work-life balance in two contexts specific to the current study: COVID-19 and graduate students of color. Chirikov and colleagues (2020) conducted a 3-month study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of undergraduate and graduate students at research universities. Of the 15,346 graduate and professional students surveyed, 32% screened positive for major depressive disorder and 39% screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder based on clinically validated screening tools. Increased rates of major depressive and generalized anxiety disorders were higher among students from lower economic status, students of color, women, and students who are caregivers.

Walsh and colleagues (2021) conducted five online focus groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, with participants including five doctoral

students of color, six master's students of color, seven faculty, six administrators (inclusive of administrative faculty), and six family members associated with the doctoral students of color. Following a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), four major themes emerged: (1) resources and access to them, (2) adjustments to home and family life, (3) magnification of existing nonfinancial issues, and (4) fear of and possibilities for the future. All participants reported a lack of distinction between work-life and home-life challenges. One family member commented that it was as if "there's no balance at all." A master's student indicated that some professors "upped our assignments, because we are at home," which contributed to a lack of balance. Working from home without a dedicated workspace or ability to study at the school or the library created challenges, as did the need to obtain supplies and set up a home office. A faculty member commented that many faculty "don't understand how the intersection of mental health, identity, and systemic oppression really play a role in being able to actually finish [a graduate degree]" (p. 966). When considering fears for the future, one participant expressed concern for her parents and the lack of ability to fly home. Recommendations included mental health check-ins for family; resource guides, inclusive of ethnic resource guides; race-based support; and faculty support in managing the anxiety with student-family demands in the face of COVID-19 (Walsh et al., 2021).

## **Support**

Wilks (2008) examined the relationship between academic stress, social support, and resilience among 314 social work students, 144 at the bachelor's level and 170 at the master's level. Wilks (2008) reported several demands leading to academic stress: "course requirements; time management issues; financial burdens; interactions with faculty; personal goals; social activities; adjustment to the campus environment; and lack of support networks" (p. 106). Academic stress was moderately lowered when the support of family or friends was present throughout the student's tenure. Additionally, this social support added to students' resilience (Wilks, 2008). The study concluded that gaining social support from friends, family, professors, and internship staff is crucial because it fosters resilience and lifelong relationships that can help an individual professionally and personally.

Other researchers have also found that academic stress can be decreased when supportive services and networks are provided (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2021; Wyland et al., 2013). Social

support may be experienced through various persons, such as friends, strangers, partners, family, and community members, as well as institutions. Social support has a direct impact on students' overall well-being—emotionally, physically, and mentally—by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Brus, 2006; Lin, 2016; Taylor, 2010; Wilks, 2008).

Graduate student life is challenging on its own, and adding work and life to the mix can exacerbate challenges. King and Herb (2012) suggested that planning break times and providing rewards can have a positive effect on an individual's emotional well-being. "For example, some students choose a time in the evening when they will stop working on any research or class activities. During this time, they refrain from checking university email, creating class lectures, reading articles for class, and browsing Google Scholar" (p. 125). King and Herb (2012) suggested that graduate students make physical and social health a priority and immerse themselves in their community. Alleman and colleagues (2018) also suggested prioritizing one's spiritual, mental, and physical health to achieve better work-life balance. Evans and colleagues (2018) suggested that graduate students should have enhanced access to mental health services, and academia should prioritize mental health resources.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### **Afrocentric Perspective**

The Afrocentric perspective provides a way of finding understanding, a community, and an inclusive pedagogy. Founded in the social reality of the Black experience of people of African descent living in the diaspora, the Afrocentric perspective aims to counter the deficit-based, dysfunctional narrative of African American people and those of African descent (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1996, 2010). Contrary to Eurocentric thought, the Afrocentric perspective "solidly place[s] the study of people of African descent within African cultural values and worldviews" (McPhatter, 2018, p. 5). Afrocentric thought is an alternative social science epistemology reflecting the cultural and political realities of African American people rather than dominant Eurocentric-based paradigms. This African-centered thought seeks to remove dysfunctional notions and damaging theoretical and practice approaches toward people of African descent and validates a worldview that is indigenous to this group. The Afrocentric perspective seeks to transform human and society holistically, that is, spiritually, morally, and humanistically (Schiele, 1996).

According to Bent-Goodley (2005), seven principles best describe an Afrocentric worldview. *Fundamental goodness* is the view that



individuals are inherently good. *Self-knowledge* involves being consciously self-aware of strengths and needed improvements when interacting with others. *Communalism* highlights honoring the interdependence of individuals and concerns of the group before self. *Interconnectedness* relates to the collective plight of disparity, racism, and exploitation, as well as working in tandem for the health and well-being of all. *Spirituality* focuses on acknowledging the existence of God. *Self-reliance* involves gaining skill sets and a knowledge base that allow for contributions that will benefit the collective. *Language and oral tradition* acknowledge the multiple modes of communication including, but not limited to, words, music, songs, proverbs, dance, community gatherings, and dialects.

Bent-Goodley's (2005) principles are fundamental to not only the Black culture but extends to the culture of many HBCUs. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are often viewed as institutions that provide an opportunity for ethnic identification while meeting the exclusive educational, and sociocultural needs of its majority African American student populations in a nurturing manner (Darrell, Littlefield, Washington, 2016).

## RESEARCH METHOD

Just as the Afrocentric paradigm is an inclusive pedagogy that places the individual of study in the center for the purpose of understanding and removes pathology-based practices (Schiele, 1996,), so too does inquiry-based learning (Bray et al., 2000).

“Within new paradigm research, collaborative inquiry (CI) is used as an umbrella term to encompass genres of research that are participatory, democratic and reflective in design, method and dissemination (Bridges & MCGee 2011, p. 211).”

As part of the current study, we sought to capture the reflections and experiences of three urban graduate students matriculating at an HBCU during a pandemic. Participants engaged in personal and collaborative episodes of reflection answering four questions: (a) What was your experience like as a graduate school student at an HBCU? (b) How did you experience support while in graduate school? (c) What were some of your stressors as a graduate student? (d) How did you experience student work-life management as a graduate student? Questions were constructed based upon a review of the current literature, including student work-life balance, academic stress, and social support (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2021; Wilks, 2008; Wyland et al., 2013).

## **Participants**

As part of the current study, the authors reflected on their student work-life balance while attending graduate school during a pandemic. Specifically, a convenience sample was used, as the participants of the current project served as authors, as they were experts in telling their own stories. All three participants were self-identified students of color enrolled full-time or part-time in a Master of Social Work program at an HBCU. All the students engaged in caretaking responsibilities. “Jay” is a 25-year-old African American single woman born in America who works as a part-time graduate assistant and a part-time childcare worker. At times, she was the caretaker for her three cousins. A full-time student, she was in the final year of her master’s in social work program. “Dee” is a 43-year-old Asian single woman born in India. She works as an adjunct informational technology instructor, with 12 years of experience in that field. She is the caretaker for her father. A part-time student, she recently completed the second year of her master’s program. “El” is an American-born 30-year-old African American man with one child. He is employed as a law enforcement officer and family services caseworker. He was enrolled part-time and recently completed the first year of the master’s program.

## **Materials**

Materials used for this collaborative inquiry were interview questions that were derived from the literature (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2021; Wilks, 2008; Wyland et al., 2013). The questionnaire allowed for the ability to acquire descriptive data, to explore perceptions of work-life balance of graduate students of color while experiencing a pandemic. Multiple group sessions occurred remotely, where participants engaged in storytelling and reflective analogy as they answered each question. Participants also used journaling as a means to capture personal reflections which allowed for meaning making at the individual and group level.

## **Design**

We used inquiry learning, which is a powerful, democratic, equitable, and robust way of facilitating adult learning experiences that are potentially transformational to the individuals involved (Bray et al., 2000; Brooks & Watkins, 1994; Kasl & Yorks, 2010). Bray and colleagues (2000) posited that collaborative inquiry rests on an evolving paradigm of inquiry that celebrates participation and democracy, where participants are co-inquirers. Collaborative inquiry “is a process consisting of repeated episodes

of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question(s) of importance to them” (Bray et al., 2000, p. 6). The process involves four stages: framing the problem, collecting evidence, analyzing evidence and documents, and sharing and celebrating. The framing of the problem by the facilitator aids the group in finding its focus. In collecting evidence, the facilitator guides the group in developing shared understandings and building additional knowledge. The facilitator analyzes evidence to assist the group in identifying patterns and themes and forming conclusions. In the final stage, the facilitator guides students to document, share, and celebrate their new understandings (Donohoo, 2013, p. 5). As part of the current study, we used various components of the collaborative inquiry process to extend our understanding. The process included four phases as represented in *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice* (Bray et al., 2000): Phase 1: Forming, Phase 2: Creating, Phase 3: Acting, Phase 4: Making Meaning.

The group formed as a result of a desire to capture the reflections and experiences of three urban graduate students matriculating at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) during a pandemic. Once the group was formed rules of engagement were established. It was determined that meetings would occur weekly, and we would remain in contact via bi-weekly conference calls and e-mail. Literature was reviewed and interview questions were made. As we seamlessly approached the acting phase of our inquiry, we met and participated in storytelling to better share our overall experiences. Discussions were led by a Caribbean-American, female facilitator who is an assistant professor of social work at an HBCU and a licensed clinical social worker.

We used narrative analysis (Reissman, 2008) and Saldana’s (2009) method to code data surrounding the work-life balance of three graduate students of color. Reflections were categorized into themes and subthemes with guidance from the facilitator and were analyzed during a collective meaning-making session by all participants. Quotations were selected based on which narrative reflection identified the theme’s most salient points. A manual process was used to cluster and thematize the reflections.

To increase trustworthiness, the study used thick, rich description, saturation, and member checking (Saladana, 2009). Thick, rich descriptions were captured during personal and collaborative reflections. The three co-inquirers performed member checking. Over the course of three sessions, they assisted with coding the data and asking challenging questions. Seidman (2006) posited that saturation of information refers to a point

where new knowledge is no longer being revealed. Saturation was achieved during the last collaborative reflective discussion.

## **RESULTS**

Six themes emerged from the study: COVID-19, ties that bind, financial responsibility, linked fate, mental and physical well-being, and student work-life management.

### **COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected students' school/work-life balance through loss, grief, and cancellation of major life events, all while they had to navigate the terrain of remote instruction. "Jay" reported:

My grandfather passed away, graduation was canceled, trips were canceled, and that was all due to COVID-19. So not only did I have to balance work and life, but now I had to learn how to survive in the online world.

Additionally, the transition to remote work and education provided opportunities to focus time on graduate studies and family. "El" shared:

COVID-19 provided me an opportunity for continuing graduate education, which became a number one focus. COVID-19 minimized travel to work and school, which increased time and focus on academic studies, in addition to home schooling of my young son. As a nontraditional graduate student, the conversion to full telework status of my two full-time employment positions allowed an increase in overall work productivity. COVID-19 has provided un-normal opportunities of self-education, creativeness, autonomy, independence, and the development of new skills such as personal accountability, time management, personal efficiency, and nontraditional use of technology (Zoom and Google Meet) outside of the office and classroom.

Living through a pandemic while attending graduated school was viewed as survival as the students managed the disappointment of not experiencing the coveted graduation ceremony, managing the grief of the loss of loved ones due to Covid-19, as well as adjusting to remote instruction. On the other hand, another graduate student of color experienced an increase in both caretaking responsibilities, productivity and student work-life management strategies.

## **Ties That Bind**

“Jay,” “Dee,” and “El” discussed and reflected on the importance of various support systems as they completed coursework. “Dee”:

One of my teachers told me my first year that “you need to build a net of support so when you fall they can catch you.” Social support systems were so crucial in matriculating through my program. I was blessed to have many opportunities that provided support during my first year. I was selected in a fellowship for my first year, which . . . provided a support system, accountability, and mentorship from the lead professors, which was needed to successfully balance the work, school, and life.

“Dee” viewed support systems as family (immediate or extended), obliging colleagues, supervisor, and mentor. She likened support systems to mile markers that aid in the success of student work-life management.

In my family, I have two married sisters and parents as well as a big extended family. A marathon serves an analogy for my systems of support. At certain mile markers, in order to be successful, I have time-management skills; healthy support system; helpful colleagues; a successful game plan; access to physical and psychological therapy; having an inspiring supervisor and mentor.

Various types of social support were deemed essential and offered accountability, mentorship,

## **Financial Responsibility**

“Jay,” “Dee,” and “El” discussed and reflected on how they were unable to solely focus on school since they had to meet financial obligations. “Dee” explained best:

As a nontraditional student, I do not have the luxury of just focusing solely on school. I had to juggle three part-time jobs, not by choice, all while balancing my school schedule, internship, and schoolwork. For “Jay,” “Dee,” and “El,” work prevented them from focusing on their studies exclusively. Paid employment was a necessity for as they were primarily responsible to pay for school and meet additional fiscal demands.

## **Linked Fate**

In discussing stress related to student work-life, “Jay,” “Dee,” and “El” reflected on the personal, cognitive, and emotional traumatic effects of linked fate as related to racism in the form of police brutality. “Dee” reported, “As an African American student, I also had to deal with the re-

traumatization of racism because of police brutality which led to the deaths of George Floyd, Brionna Taylor, and many more.” “El” stated:

I was very saddened by the racism and police brutality that has occurred in our nation for the last 300-plus years. Before police brutality it was discrimination, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, hangings, and the mutilation of slaves. All of those themes have snowballed into police brutality. . . . So being an African American male, I have to look over my shoulders twice or even three times before making any move or making a decision. My face is always in my rearview mirror while operating my personal vehicle and government vehicle. For me, it has been an integral part of my career and personal life on how to proceed with law enforcement, when I get pulled over, making sure I have my credentials on me at all times, placing my badge and license outside of the window, with both of my hands, so they know that I am law enforcement and I have in my possession a firearm and/or to reduce anxiety and fear when approaching the unknown vehicle. So there are a lot of procedures that I have to take in order to maintain my personal safety.

Seeing or hearing about the senseless deaths of African American men and women as result of racism and police brutality via social media was traumatizing and negatively impacted student work-life management. Additionally, personal cautionary procedures were put in place when stopped law enforcement to avoid ensure personal safety. Although these acts of racism and brutality were experienced by individuals unknown to the graduate students of color, there was vicarious impact because of a communal sense of belonging to the Black community along with knowledge of systemic, oppressive, discriminatory, and brutal acts inflicted upon individuals of African descent living in America.

### **Mental and Physical Well-Being**

Being conscious of mental and physical well-being and prioritizing self-care were discussed by “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El” as ways to manage the stress associated with student work-life balance. “Dee” reported, “I realized the importance of prioritizing my mental health and implementing self-care activities throughout the program.”

“Jay” commented:

Apart from friends and family, I resort to meditation and yoga to relieve anxiety occurring from tight deadlines and expectations to perform better. Eating healthy food is another way to support my physical and mental health. What is stressful is consistently performing 3.0 or above

grade-point average, paying tuition on time, socializing with family and friends, dealing with anxiety and sometimes depression while comparing yourself to others.

“Dee,” “Jay,” and “El” were cognizant of how much they could withstand or limiting what they took on as a way to keep stress in check. “El” reported:

Mental health and physical health are two important components as it relates to graduate studies. Taking two classes allows me to maintain my mental and physical health. I have been pursuing this master’s in social worker degree for a while. Therefore, I know what comes along with pursuing the degree, which alleviates the stress. It’s important to know what people can and cannot take on.

Being aware of stress and personal stress limitations was important to the management of student work-life management. Self-care strategies that aided in stress reduction were important in supporting physical health and decreasing mental health challenges, such as anxiety and coping with depression.

### **Student Work-Life Management**

“Dee,” “Jay,” and “El” reported that student work-life management was not easy and required the implementation of various strategies with support systems at the core. “Dee compared the totality of the student work-life experience to a rite of passage.

I figured it was going to be easy to balance graduate school, work, and life, but I soon realized that this was going to be a challenge. Balancing work, school, and life requires a vast amount of strategies to help mitigate or alleviate the burden, but creating a supportive environment is crucial. When I entered graduate school, I was a child; when I graduated I became an adult. It was like a rite of passage.

“Jay” reported using time management as an additional strategy to achieve student work-life harmony.

Having previous IT work experience and attending conferences on effective time management helped with managing time and organizing my daily/monthly/yearly activities. Student work-life harmony for me means assignment and paper due dates are met; GPA of 3.0 or above is maintained; happy family and friends gathering; sparing time for self on the weekend; getting positive feedback from my supervisor at work; opportunity to make new friends while cherishing old ones; no financial, psychological, or

physical stress; at the end of year personal and professional goals are achieved.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

During this collaborative inquiry, the nontraditional graduate students of color were the center of analysis, inclusive of the interconnected multisystem (Boyd-Franklin, 1989) around their lives (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1996). All of the graduate students of color valued the importance of functioning in multiple roles, especially the roles of worker, caretaker, and student. “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El” worked and engaged in caretaking roles for a child, parent, or extended family.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student work-life management was twofold for “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El.” “Dee” and “Jay” experienced grief and loss associated with the death of family members, not being able to see family members and friends, transitioning from attending classes in person to adjusting to remote education, and not being able to engage in major life events such as graduation. “El” viewed the teleworking and stay-at-home order as an opportunity to spend quality time with his child and give concentrated attention to graduate school, resulting in increased productivity.

Support systems, whether immediate family, extended family, friends, colleagues, professors, or mentors, allowed for interrelations that created a community for “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El,” replicating cultural values associated with people of color (Bent-Goodley, 2003, 2005; Martin & Martin, 2002; McPhatter, 2016; Schiele, 1996; Wilks, 2008). The various support system typologies as posited by Taylor (2010) were also experienced by “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El.” Informational support in the form of a fellowship along with conferences that focused on time management offered guidance and information on how to cope with the stressors of student work-life management. Although “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El” offered instrumental support, such as the caretaking of family members, they also received the same support when needed. Validation evident in emotional support was experienced through the fellowship, friends, professors, colleagues, supervisor, and mentor (Taylor, 2010).

Stressors associated with student work-life management were offset by the communalism associated with the various types of support systems for “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El.” Gaining social support from friends, family, professors, and internship staff was crucial in the graduate school experience, because it fostered community interconnectedness in the form of



linked fate (Bent-Goodley, 2003, 2005; Simien, 2005). As “Dee” expressed, the accountability and interconnectedness associated with being psychologically and emotionally linked with others was essential to the success of student work-life management. On the other hand, racism in the form of police brutality was widely publicized via various social media outlets; as such, linked fate was also experienced, wherein “Dee” and “El” were vicariously affected, whether in the form of trauma or hypervigilance (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Schiele, 1996; Simien, 2005). Stressors were also offset by strategies of organization and time management (King & Herb, 2012), self-care activities, and mental and physical health strategies (Alleman et al., 2018; Bent-Goodley, 2005; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Wilks, 2008; Wyland et al., 2013).

The Greenhaus and Allen (2011) definition of work-life balance appeared insufficient for the participants, as various components of student work and life were in constant flux, creating stress and tension. Coping with living in a pandemic, dealing with the negative psychological and cognitive effects associated with linked fate, meeting academic and work demands, and managing the various subgroups along multisystemic levels of community on a daily basis requires a myriad of individuals and support systems to meet the academic, work, or life goals of “Dee,” “Jay,” and “El.”

### **Limitations**

Several limitations to the current study are relevant. First, the authors were participants in the study, which provided a limited view on the subject matter. Secondly, the participants were sampled from a single university program at a single point in time. Further, participants were familiar with each other prior to data collection, so it is possible they may have not wanted to share specific personal challenges or experiences. Furthermore, the graduate students of color of this inquiry experience had privileges that do not necessarily apply to other people of color in nonacademic settings. All of the graduate students of color involved in this collaborative inquiry were college educated, had support networks, and were knowledgeable of self-care strategies to assist them with their student work-life management challenges where other people of in nonacademic settings may not have availability to these resources. The method and sample size was small which provided a narrow view on the subject as well as an inability to replicate.

## IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have implications for education, policy, and research. “Dee” and “El” discussed the importance of teachable moments from faculty or mentors that they recalled during the pandemic. Due to the decrease of the face-to-face interaction associated with a traditional graduate school experience, professors and students need to increase the level of involvement to ensure success for the urban graduate student of color. Both faculty and students should be knowledgeable about available resources inclusive of general, ethnic, and cultural supportive services. Additionally, information about student issues, guidelines for accessing appropriate support, and strategies for identifying students who struggle to achieve work-life balance (Brus, 2006).

Brus (2006) also suggested that for universities to provide appropriate support, student affairs should gather three types of information about graduate students:

- (1) basic demographic information;
- (2) identification of types of academic support the student is interested in, such as study groups, tutoring services, job shadowing opportunities, and cooperative childcare networks;
- and (3) a checklist of cultural, spiritual, recreational, intellectual, and political interests and activities they are interested in (p. 6).

Parenting status should also be included as basic demographic questions for all universities and colleges.

Additionally, as suggested by “Dee,” graduate students should be offered workshops and peer mentorship programming specifically geared to student work-life management, allowing for education, resource linkage, verbal processing, and emotional support. Graduate programs should provide opportunities for fellowship programs for first-year students to increase support, accountability, and mentorship. Programs for recent alumni to volunteer to mentor first-year graduate students could also provide mentorship and guidance. Further, second-year students could create committees in areas such as mental health or stress strategies to support first-year students.

Regarding policy, “Dee,” “El” and “Jay” discussed the importance of mental health. Mental health counseling should be required for graduate students. Evans and colleagues (2018) suggested that graduate students should have enhanced access to mental health services, and policies should be created that prioritize mental health resources in academia. In agreement with the recommendations of Alleman and colleagues (2018), graduate students need to prioritize their spiritual, mental, and physical health.

Furthermore, for graduate students of color who are parents, policies are needed that allow for no-cost or low-cost childcare or collaborations with reputable childcare providers. Additionally, as individuals continue to experience economic hardship associated to the pandemic there is a need for resurrecting the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that expired in 2020 to ensure pandemic related paid leave .

Higher education should also encourage the advancement of social policy from an Afrocentric perspective by creating and reforming policy to include the needs, beliefs, and perspectives of nontraditional graduate students of color in an effort to reduce the stressors associated with student work-life management. In this undertaking, it is important to understand that policy is an interdependent process that involves variations of nontraditional students. Policy then becomes an “expression of critical values, particularly for the individuals who develop, promote, and implement them (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, & Carlton-LaNey, 2017, p. 4).”

Finally, relevant to research, qualitative and quantitative research is needed in the areas of student work-life balance and student work-life management for urban graduate students of color in various stages in matriculation, relationship status, and family composition. Additional research could focus on the multiple roles of urban matriculating parents and how they may or may not aid in student work-life management. Other research could explore how fellowship programs and mentorship for urban graduate students of color affect student work-life management. Finally, research is needed on the importance of accountability circles at predominantly white institutions for women of color.

A community culture underscores the importance of a collective concept of human identity, need, and shared experience; the more substantive and enduring reality of the unseen; and the interconnectedness of all people (Sealy, 2021). Although the insights gained are not generalizable, the importance of community to thrive in, connect, with decreasing stress and manage challenges associated with student-work-life management has been noted by the graduate students of this inquiry experience and is supported by the literature. The steady increase in graduate students of color who are categorized as nontraditional places pressure on institutions to provide a broader view of the academic community and include an array of support services. As a result, it becomes imperative to recognize that the one-size-fits-all educational model informing institutional cultures today is no longer valid (Polson, 2003).

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