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## Navigating Crisis: Graduate International Students' Academic Experiences and Faculty Support at HBCUs During COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT:** *Graduate international students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) faced significant inequities in their classroom experiences during COVID-19, a global crisis that exposed longstanding disparities in institutional preparedness and academic support. In this study, inequities are defined as barriers that limited students' ability to fully engage in academic learning, including interruptions to instruction, reductions in access to technology and academic support, challenges related to language proficiency, and alterations in interactions with faculty. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study examined the academic transitional experiences of 11 graduate international students enrolled at HBCUs during the pandemic. Guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its Four S's framework, findings revealed challenges related to remote learning, diminished confidence in classroom participation, and perceived declines in English language proficiency. As global disruptions increasingly shape international student mobility and academic engagement, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature and underscores the need for equitable, crisis-responsive academic support structures for international students at HBCUs.*

**Keywords:** HBCUs; international students; COVID-19; classroom learning; equity; access; belonging

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## INTRODUCTION

The onset of COVID-19 caused significant disruptions to the academic learning environment for graduate international students enrolled at HBCUs. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global public health emergency (Martel, 2020b). In response, federal and state governments instituted curfews, closed businesses, and implemented mandatory safety protocols. Higher education leaders across the United States were required to make rapid decisions regarding campus closures and instructional delivery (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Although these decisions were intended to mitigate viral transmission, international students were disproportionately impacted by sudden campus closures, travel restrictions, and the rapid shift to remote learning modalities (Glass, 2021).

Recent scholarship documents significant disruptions to international students' classroom learning during COVID-19 (Dodd et al., 2021; Meesa, 2021; Ruiz & Khairi, 2020). Many international students reported reduced confidence in classroom participation, particularly when speaking English in virtual settings. Social distancing and campus closures intensified isolation and negatively affected mental health, which further shaped students' academic engagement and performance (Meesa, 2021). The purpose of this study was to examine the inequities graduate international students encountered in classroom learning environments while enrolled at HBCUs during COVID-19 (Brown-Grier, 2023).

This article presents a subset of findings from a larger dissertation study examining the academic transitional experiences of graduate international students at HBCUs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brown-Grier, 2023). While the broader dissertation explored multiple academic and nonacademic dimensions, this paper focuses specifically on classroom learning, technology use, and faculty support.

The purpose of this study was to examine how graduate international students at HBCUs experienced classroom learning, technology use, and faculty support during the COVID-19 pandemic, using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as an interpretive framework (Brown-Grier, 2023). The study was guided by the following research question: *What were the academic experiences of HBCU graduate international students during COVID-19?*

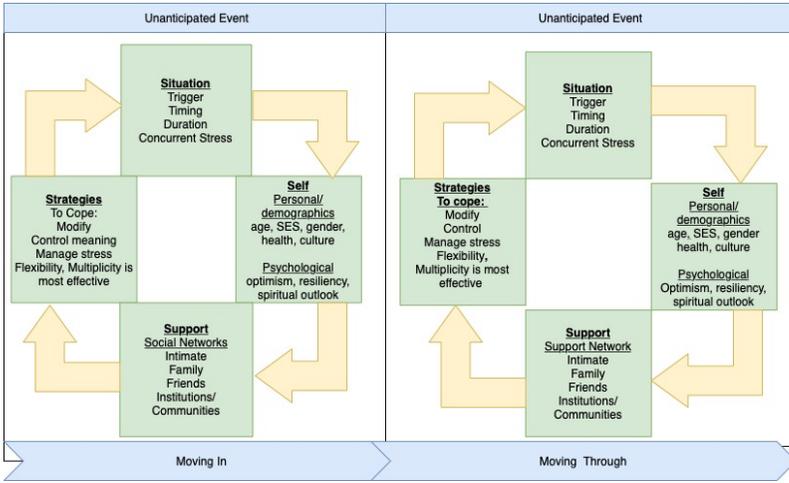
This study contributes to the field of international higher education by centering the academic experiences of graduate international students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While existing research has largely focused on undergraduate populations or the perspectives of international student services staff, far less is known about how graduate international students experience academic transitions during periods of crisis, particularly within a marginalized institutional context. By applying Schlossberg's Transition Theory to semi-structured interview data this study extends scholarship on international students' resilience, faculty support, and academic adaptation, offering insights relevant to scholars, faculty, and institutional leaders seeking to support international students during large-scale disruptions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals experience and respond to life changes. Transitions are triggered by events that may be anticipated, unanticipated, or characterized as nonevents, and individuals navigate these transitions through the phases of moving in, moving through, and moving out (Anderson et al., 2012; Barclay, 2017). Within this framework, COVID-19 is conceptualized as an unanticipated transition, defined by Schlossberg as an event that occurs without warning and disrupts established routines and roles (Anderson et al., 2012). For graduate international students, the pandemic abruptly altered classroom learning, access to faculty, and academic support structures (Brown-Grier, 2023).

Because data collection occurred while the pandemic was ongoing, this study focuses on the *moving through* phase, during which individuals actively manage and adapt to transitional conditions. Schlossberg's Four S's framework—*situation, self, support, and strategies*—were used as an analytic lens to guide data organization, coding, and interpretation. *Situation* captures classroom disruptions, reductions in access to technology, and challenges associated with remote instruction. *Self* reflects participant characteristics, including international and graduate student status, language background, and prior academic preparation. *Support* refers to academic and interpersonal resources, including faculty engagement, peer relationships, and institutional structures. *Strategies* describe the coping mechanisms participants employed, such as self-directed learning, resilience-building practices, and adaptive language practices. Collectively, these components provide a holistic lens for interpreting how graduate international students at HBCUs navigated academic transitions during COVID-19 (Brown-Grier, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Applications of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to Graduate International Students’ Academic Experiences During COVID-19

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Knight (2012), “the internationalization of U.S. higher education includes formalized academic relations between countries that were expressed in bilateral cultural and scientific agreements” (p. 29). After the passage of the Fulbright Act of 1946, enrollments of foreign students in the U.S. began to grow. In 1959, there were approximately 48,000 international students enrolled in American colleges and universities. By 2009, the number of international students in the United States had increased to 690,000 (de Wit, 2012). According to the Institute of International Education’s Open Doors Report 2021, during the academic year 2018-2019 the international students enrolled in the United States totaled 872,214, with 431,930 undergraduate students and 132,581 graduate and professional students enrolled (2.1% fewer than in 2017-2018).

Recent literature in the Journal of International Students has documented how international students around the world navigated academic disruptions and institutional responses during the pandemic. For example, Uday (2024) found that international students developed resilience strategies to adapt to challenges in academic, social, and support domains across institutional contexts. Similarly, Almadadha et al. (2025) identified how variations in institutional support shaped students’ academic experiences and coping mechanisms during COVID-19. Chaliawala (2025) further highlights the psychological resilience of postgraduate international students, emphasizing the role of individual well-being within global crisis context. Together, these studies underscore the global and comparative nature of pandemic-related academic transitions and position the current study within a broader international education research agenda.

Dos Santos (2019) found that international students enrolled at HBCUs faced inequities that impacted their academic experiences. The participants in Dos Santos's (2019) study consisted of five Chinese students. Chinese students are not the largest group of international students enrolled at HBCUs (Brown-Grier, 2021; Brown-Grier, 2023); this reality aligns with Dos Santos's difficulty finding Chinese participants. The participants in the study reported that they experienced discrimination from peers, faculty, and staff at their institution. The participants also experienced discrimination from their American classmates based on their language usage, their personal characteristics, and cultural differences.

Bista (2018) observes that successful international student experiences are based on acknowledging "personal educational differences, social integration, help-seeking approaches, building meaningful relationships, funding issues, different communication styles and customs, and more." Researchers have found that international students who engage in on-campus activities and socialize with domestic students have an increased sense of belonging.

The shift from in-person to online classes was difficult for graduate international students. In addition, time zone differences contributed to international students' academic difficulties. International students who returned home had to adjust to taking classes either very early in the morning or very late in the evening. Students had to adjust to new sleep patterns, which affected their quality of sleep and their ability to perform to their full potential in class (Ruiz & Khairi, 2020).

Disruption to the learning environment caused graduate international students to lose confidence when speaking in class through online platforms. Not speaking in class may have affected their participation in class. While international students must be proficient in English, most struggle with the informal language used in classroom settings. A study conducted by Meesa et al. (2021) found that international students' academic learning was impacted because they could not engage with their peers and ask questions about information they did not understand (Meesa et al., 2021). In short, graduate international students were faced with significant challenges in the classroom during COVID-19 that disrupted their learning.

Most available literature examining the impact of COVID-19 on international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States focuses heavily on the perspectives of international student affairs staff and the support offered to students. Additionally, most literature focuses on undergraduate international students. There is scant literature on international students at HBCUs, international students' experiences during COVID-19, or graduate international students' experiences. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by focusing on graduate international student's academic experiences at HBCUs during COVID-19.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The phenomenological approach utilized in this study was originally developed and detailed in Brown-Grier (2023). Using a qualitative, hermeneutic-

phenomenological approach, this study examined the academic transitional experiences of international graduate students enrolled at HBCUs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the interpretation of lived experience, and the meaning individuals ascribe to significant events. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture participants' perspectives on classroom disruptions, faculty interactions, and academic coping strategies (van Manen, 1990; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Collection**

Participants included 11 graduate international students holding F-1, A-1, J-1, or H-1B visas who were enrolled in master's or doctoral programs at public or private HBCUs during the pandemic. Purposive sampling was used to identify eligible participants through graduate programs and academic departments, and snowball sampling was employed to expand recruitment among a population that is often difficult to access (Durdella, 2018). Participants completed a demographic questionnaire aligned with the *self*-theme of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Participant Home, Country, Country of Citizenship, and Racial Identity**

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>HOME COUNTRY</b>	<b>COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP</b>	<b>RACIAL IDENTITY</b>
<b>Sunjie</b>	Barbados	Barbados	West Indian/ Black
<b>Nancy</b>	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	White
<b>Anna</b>	Commonwealth of Dominica	Commonwealth of Dominica	Black
<b>Wiley</b>	England	United Kingdom	African/Black
<b>Rachel</b>	Uganda	Uganda	Black
<b>Tyrone</b>	Bahamas	Bahamas	Black
<b>Kay</b>	The Republic of Kenya	Kenya	Black
<b>Hallie</b>	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	Person of Color
<b>James</b>	India	India	Asian
<b>Arielle</b>	Jamaica	Jamaica	Black
<b>Willow*</b>			Afro- Latina

*\*Missing information for one participant*

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol originally developed for a larger doctoral dissertation project (Brown-Grier, 2023). Data collection occurred in two stages: completion of a demographic questionnaire and participation in individual semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were audio-

recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data were securely stored in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements.

### ***Data Analysis***

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using a multistage coding process that included open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Saldaña, 2016). Final themes were interpreted using Schlossberg's Four S's framework. Atlas.ti software was used to support data organization and analysis (Brown-Grier, 2023).

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Howard University Institutional Review Board (Approval No: IRB-2022-0324) as part of the original doctoral research (Brown-Grier, 2023). All participants provided informed consent and were made aware of the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard participants' identities, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Given the potential sensitivity of discussing academic challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, care was taken to conduct interviews respectfully and to minimize participant distress.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings are organized around four interrelated themes that capture how graduate international students at HBCUs navigated academic transitions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the interview data revealed four primary themes consistent with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the themes align with the Four S's framework: situation, support, self, and strategies (Brown-Grier, 2023). Together, these themes highlight how shifts in learning environments, faculty engagement, language and confidence, and student-driven coping strategies shaped participants' academic experiences during the period of remote instruction. The findings presented here focus specifically on classroom learning, technology use, and faculty support, drawing on participants' narratives to illustrate how academic transitions were experienced and managed in real time.

### ***Theme 1: Technology Adaptation and Learning Environments (Situation)***

Analysis of the interview data for theme 1 regarding Technology Adaptation and Learning Environments are consistent with the findings reported in Brown-Grier (2023). The physical learning environments and access to technology shaped how graduate international students navigated the transition to remote instruction during COVID-19. Most participants lived in apartments, often with roommates or housemates, and attended classes in shared or private spaces within

their homes. All participants completed coursework remotely, typically from a bedroom or designated desk area, while several also balanced on-campus employment. Anna shared in detail the setting in which she attended classes:

Classes... were remote. I lived in a shared apartment. I had roommates rather... My room was basically the only space that wasn't shared. I had a little desk in my room, so that's where I would try to [do] all my classes.

Participants accustomed to hands-on, in-person instruction described the transition to remote learning as a period of adjustment, particularly in practice-based and STEM-focused programs where laboratory work and direct faculty interaction had previously been central to learning.

Access to technology emerged as a situation factor shaping participants' academic experiences during the transition to remote learning (see Figure 1). While most participants reported adequate access to devices and internet connectivity, several encountered technology-related disruptions that interfered with coursework and class participation. For example, Anna used a Google Chromebook that did not support required software such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, or Zoom, which limited her ability to complete academic tasks. Similarly, Sunjie experienced a computer failure that forced her to rely on a cell phone for class participation and data analysis until she was able to purchase a new laptop. A small number of participants also reported intermittent internet connectivity issues, though these challenges were not widespread across the sample.

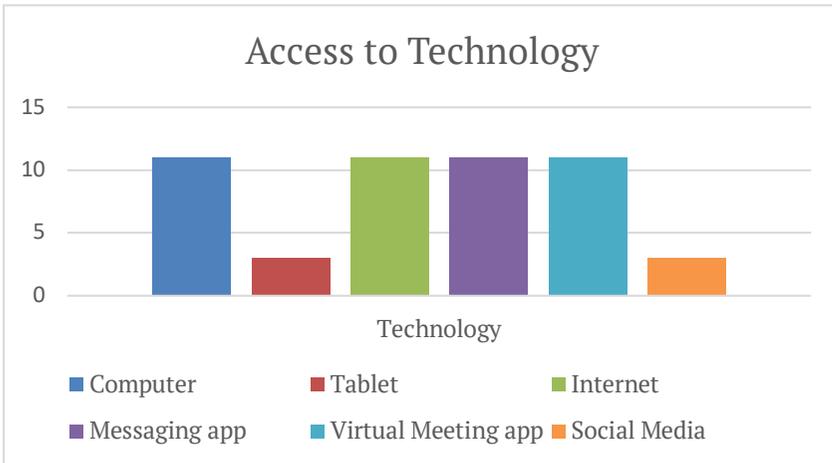


Figure 1: Access to Technology

***Theme 2: Faculty Support and Instructional Practices (Support)***

The qualitative findings concerning Faculty Support and Instructional Practices align with the themes identified in the original doctoral research (Brown-Grier, 2023). Faculty support emerged as a critical factor shaping graduate international students' academic experiences during the pandemic. While many participants described instructors as flexible and supportive during the transition to remote learning, others reported significant challenges related to instructional practices, grading, and interpersonal interactions. Inconsistent faculty engagement and limited responsiveness heightened academic stress during an already disruptive period. Halle described her experiences with professors who struggled to understand her as a non-native English speaker and responded with frustration rather than support. She recalled several instances when her instructors raised their voices when she asked for clarification, noting that these interactions went unreported due to fear of retaliation:

Some of them [professors], especially when I start in university, I didn't feel full respect. My English was so bad. So, when I didn't understand, they yelled at my face. And that's happened many times, not only for me, for many Saudi students, but no one wants to report that because they don't want any problem.

Similarly, Arielle described a situation in which inconsistent faculty engagement during remote instruction contributed to perceived grading inequities. She explained that a professor who frequently missed online sessions later assigned low grades that students felt did not reflect their academic effort, prompting several to appeal the outcome.

That one class with that professor that I don't know, it was just totally different because even at the end of spring 2020, we were having issues because he [the professor] ended up giving some of us a low grade and we didn't think we deserved it. So, we had to appeal.

These experiences illustrate how breakdowns in faculty support during remote learning undermined students' sense of academic fairness and stability, reinforcing the central role of instructional practices in shaping international students' ability to navigate crisis-related transitions.

***Theme 3: Language, Confidence, and Classroom Participants (Self)***

As detailed in Brown-Grier (2023), the data regarding Language, Confidence, and Classroom Participants revealed significant impacts on student persistence during the pandemic. Participants described changes in classroom engagement and self-perception as central features of their academic experiences during remote learning. Many noted that virtual classrooms required greater intentional effort to participate and made it difficult to interpret peer responses,

which affected their confidence and sense of presence. While participants characterized their courses as welcoming and student-friendly, sustained engagement in online environments proved challenging, particularly during long or late class sessions.

Anna explained that her professors attempted to foster engagement, while extended screen time and consecutive classes contributed to cognitive fatigue and reduced participation

[My professors] did their best to be as engaging as possible. And it's really up to us as the students who really try to push the engagement with questions and stuff like that. But there are times when it can be very dull because, for example, I had a class that started at 7:00 PM and went until 10:00 PM. And we had classes before that. By that time, it's just like, you know, you're dumb, you don't have any questions.

Sunjie similarly described the transition to remote learning as a process of trial and error, particularly given her prior reliance on in-person instruction in a STEM-based program. However, she noted that virtual learning environments also altered how she navigated language and confidence. As an international student, she described masking her accent to in face-to-face setting to avoid standing out, while finding greater confidence participating in virtual classes:

For me, language, since I left home, has been a challenge because you try to mask your accent as an international student. So, you don't stand out as much. This is just my personal opinion. I tend to speak softer, quieter, or more slurred because of that. During Zoom, I found it wasn't as challenging, because you have the microphone and speakers. And having the camera off, I'm more confident to be vocal.

Together, these accounts demonstrate how remote learning reshaped graduate international students' sense of self in the classroom. While some participants experienced virtual environments as supportive and confidence-enhancing, others struggled with sustained engagement and language-related anxiety, particularly in asynchronous formats. These experiences underscore how individual characteristics, including language background, learning preferences, and prior instructional norms, shaped students' ability to participate and feel academically confident during the pandemic, highlighting the central role of the "self" in navigating academic transitions.

Participants further described language-related challenges as a central to shifts in classroom confidence during remote learning. Non-native English speakers reported heightened self-consciousness about speaking, writing, and presenting, particularly as opportunities for informal language practice with peers and faculty decreased. While some participants felt more comfortable contributing verbally in virtual settings others experienced a decline in confidence as academic expectations intensified during the pandemic.

Halle described how changes in faculty composition during the pandemic exacerbated language-related challenges. While several instructors had previously demonstrated an understanding of her needs as a non-native English speaker, she perceived newer faculty as holding unrealistic expectations for non-native English speaker students:

Sometimes they prefer ask question and uh, ask to write the answer on the [Zoom] chat, and I'm so slowly in writing; English is my second language. So, I didn't have the time. Some of them don't understand that we are a second-language speaker, so we need more time.

Willow, a non-native English speaker; in her first year of graduate study in the United States, similarly described how language proficiency and confidence became increasingly intertwined during remote learning. Despite meeting institutional English language requirements, she reported a loss of confidence in classroom participation:

Language and confidence are things that are linked to me. Like when I arrive[d] here, I think that I knew how to speak English and then I have, I'm still have struggling with that. And I lost my confidence in everything

Across accounts, non-native English-speaking participants emphasized the need for additional time to complete written assignments, respond to emails, and prepare presentations. Reduced opportunities for conversational engagements during remote learning further limited language development, reinforcing how confidence, rather than proficiency alone, shaped students' academic participation during the pandemic.

#### ***Theme 4: Resilience and Academic Coping Strategies (Strategies)***

Consistent with the findings reported in Brown-Grier (2023), analysis of the Resilience and Academic Coping Strategies data highlighted several critical barriers for international students. Graduate international students described a range of strategies they employed to adapt academically during the transition to remote learning. These strategies included leveraging recorded lectures, restructuring study routines, and exercising greater autonomy over learning environments. Together, these approaches reflected students' efforts to maintain academic progress amid reduced in-person interaction and ongoing uncertainty.

Halle, a non-native English speaker, described using recorded lectures as a main strategy to support comprehension and learning during remote instruction. While she valued the flexibility of recorded content, she also noted that reduced opportunities for informal conversation with peers and instructors limited her ability to practice spoken English:

The professor record[ing] [the] lecture was helpful. The only thing I missed this time is to speak with my classmate and with my professor.

Sometimes we don't have time for each one to speak. In the in-person class, we work as a group, we speak a lot with our classmates. So that affects my English, improving. So, my speaking [is] still so bad because I didn't practice a lot speaking with my classmate or my professors.

Arielle similarly described adapting to remote learning by taking advantage of the flexibility and autonomy it afforded. She explained that attending class from home allowed her to manage her time, physical needs, and academic workload more effectively:

... it was student friendly. It was also comfortable because it was my home and um, it was easy to just go get a snack, come back to class, you know, get water, take a break, uh, go to the bathroom, you know, stuff like that. Because at least if you turn off the video, you still have the audio. So you can be doing what you're doing. I could be finishing up another assignment while I'm in that class, you know, especially if it is right after. So, it was conducive to studying, to learning, um, my condition and my environment.

In addition to leveraging flexibility and autonomy, some participants described the need to develop new organization strategies to manage the structure of online coursework. Rachel explained the courses relying heavily on asynchronous discussion boards placed greater responsibility on students to independently track assignments and deadlines, a shift she found difficult to navigate:

...discussion boards were really difficult. And so, the classes that had a lot of discussion boards were hard for me to keep up [with] because I'm also that sort, which is not super helpful, but I don't really use calendars that much. Keeping up with everything that was going on in the classes, I'm just like, if the teacher doesn't mention it at the end of class, then you lost me on that one.

Collectively, these findings illustrate how graduate international students at HBCUs navigated academic transitions during COVID-19 through interconnected situational conditions, personal characteristics, available support systems, and adaptive strategies (Brown-Grier, 2023). Classroom learning environments and access to technology shaped students' immediate experiences, while faculty support and instructional practices played a critical role in mediating academic stability. Individual factors related to language, confidence, and self-perception further influenced classroom participation, and students' coping strategies demonstrated resilience in sustaining academic engagement amid ongoing disruption. Together, these themes align with Schlossberg's Transition Theory and provide a structured understanding of how graduate international students experienced a managed academic change during the pandemic.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study is to examine how graduate international students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) experienced academic transition during the COVID-19 pandemic using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, with particular attention to the "moving through" phase and the Four S's: situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2011). According to Brown-Grier (2023), findings indicate that the pandemic functioned as a prolonged academic disruption that reshaped students' classroom engagement, language confidence, and access to instructional support. While faculty support emerged as a critical stabilizing resource, students also encountered gaps in instructional preparedness, limited academic accommodations, and reduced opportunities for peer interaction. Together, these findings reveal how preexisting academic inequities for graduate international students at HBCUs were magnified during COVID-19 and underscore the central role of faculty support in shaping students' academic resilience during periods of crisis.

### ***Technology Adaptation and Learning Environments (Situation)***

Within Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the "situation" refers to the contextual conditions that shape how individuals experience and respond to change. For graduate international students at HBCUs, the sudden shift to remote institution created academic conditions characterized by home-based learning environments, limited access to campus resources, and increased reliance on digital platforms. Similar patterns have been documented among international students across U.S. institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, where off-campus living arrangements and rapid transitions to online learning reshaped academic engagement and access to institutional support (Whatley & Fisher, 2021; 2022). Although most participants remained in the United States and retained access to course, the relocation of academic environment into shared or private home spaces altered patterns of engagement, concentration, and interaction. Technology access further functioned as an equity issue rather than a neutral tool, as device limitations and connectivity disruptions directly affected students' ability to participate fully in coursework. These conditions framed the academic transitions as an ongoing and uneven process, shaping how students navigated learning during the pandemic. The challenges of Learning Environments documented in Brown-Grier (2023) imply that future institutional policy must prioritize synchronous support to mirror the high-touch engagement typical of the HBCU classroom experience.

### ***Faculty Support and Instructional Practices (Support)***

The interpretation of these results aligns with the framework proposed in Brown-Grier (2023), suggesting that faculty support acts as a primary buffer against technological isolation. Faculty support emerged as a critical stabilizing resource for graduate international students navigating academic transitions

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants consistently described professors as empathetic, flexible, and responsive, with faculty practices such as extended deadlines, regular check-ins, and the provision of recorded lectures reducing academic stress and supporting continued engagement. These findings align with prior research documents mentorship-oriented faculty relationships at HBCUs (Baah et al., 2018; Mohammed et al., 2020), suggesting that relational and culturally responsive pedagogical traditions extended into virtual learning environments during the pandemic. Notably, recorded lectures function as an important form of academic support for non-native English speakers, enabling review and comprehension amid disrupted classroom interaction. Together, these findings underscore the central role of faculty support in fostering academic safety, inclusion, and persistence for graduate international students during periods of crisis.

### ***Language, Confidence, and Classroom Participants (Self)***

These findings extend the previous conclusion that international students at HBCUs navigate a dual-layer of transitional challenges (Brown-Grier, 2023). Graduate international students' experiences during COVID-19 reveal how academic transitions are shaped not only by instructional conditions but also by shifts in self-perception and academic identity. In this study, the theme "self" is reflected in students' evolving sense of academic confidence, language identity, and perceived ability to participate meaningfully in virtual classroom environments. Participants described heightened self-consciousness in virtual learning environments, particularly as opportunities for informal interaction and real-time feedback decreased. While some students experienced online platforms as confidence-enhancing by reducing visibility and accent-related anxiety, others reported diminished engagement and uncertainty about academic performance. These patterns mirror prior research documenting how reduced interaction and linguistic self-consciousness during the pandemic shaped international students' academic confidence and sense of self (Messa et al., 2021). These findings illustrate how the pandemic disrupted students' sense of academic self, positioning confidence, rather than language proficiency alone, as a key dimension of the transition.

### ***Resilience and Academic Coping Strategies (Strategies)***

Students' responses to the disruption of academic routines during the pandemic highlight the active role graduate international students played in managing their academic transitions. The strategies discussed here refer specifically to academic coping practices students developed to manage coursework, engagement, and learning under remote instructional conditions. Participants described employing a range of adaptive academic strategies, including rewatching recorded lectures to enhance comprehension, restructuring daily routines to balance academic and personal responsibilities, and exercising self-motivation to remain engaged in virtual classroom settings. Rather than

passive reactions to institutional disruption, these strategies reflect intentional efforts to sustain academic progress amid prolonged uncertainty and reduced in-person interaction. Consistent with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, such adaptive practices underscore the importance of flexibility and agency during the "moving through" phase, illustrating how students mobilized personal resources to navigate uneven instructional conditions.

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate how graduate international students at HBCUs navigated an unanticipated academic transition through a dynamic interplay of situational constraints, institutional support, individual self-perceptions, and adaptive strategies. By applying Schlossberg's Transition Theory to the academic experiences of graduate international students during COVID-19, this study extends the use of the Four S's beyond individual life events to examine systemic disruptions that reshape learning environments. Centering student perspectives, particularly within historically marginalized institutional contexts, underscores the importance of faculty preparedness, relational support, and student agency in sustaining academic engagement during times of crisis. These insights contribute to more nuanced understanding of international students' experiences at HBCUs and offer a foundation for rethinking academic support structures in future periods of institutional disruption. Ultimately, the academic coping mechanisms identified here support the conclusion that international students are not passive recipients of support but active architects of their own success (Brown-Grier, 2023).

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for faculty and institutions working with graduate international students at HBCUs during periods of crisis. Although many of the inequities identified in this study predated the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to remote instruction exposed and intensified gaps in instructional delivery, student support, and faculty preparedness for virtual learning environments. Graduate international students emphasized the importance of faculty training in online instructional practices, including the consistent use of accessible learning technologies, the timely dissemination of accurate course information, and the routine recording of class sessions.

Participants also underscored the value of inclusive instructional practices that acknowledge linguistic diversity and support for non-native English speakers. Incorporating closed captions, allowing additional time for written responses, and providing recorded lectures emerged as low-cost yet high-impact strategies for promoting equitable participation in virtual classrooms. Beyond instructional logistics, students highlighted the importance of curriculum design that integrates global and non-Western perspectives. Such approaches validate international students' lived experiences, foster more inclusive classroom dialogue, and aligned with institutional commitments to global learning and culturally responsive pedagogy.

At the institutional level, these findings point to the need for policies that prioritize sustained faculty development in culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices, particularly for graduate-level instruction. Institutions should consider mandating regular professional development focused on teaching international and multilingual students, especially in online or hybrid formats. While this study centers on academic experiences, the implications extend to broader institutional responsibility for supporting graduate international students during systemic disruptions, emphasizing the role of proactive faculty preparation and institutional accountability in mitigating academic inequities.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 11 graduate international students from select HBCUs, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across institutional types or geographic regions. Second, participants self-selected into the study, which may have resulted in overrepresentation of individuals who were more willing or able to articulate their academic experiences during the pandemic. Third, the use of self-reported data collected through questionnaires and virtual interviews may have introduced recall bias or constrained the depth or responses due to technological or environmental factors.

Additionally, this study focused specifically on academic experiences during COVID-19. Although participants occasionally referenced immigration concerns, financial stress, and health or mental health challenges, these dimensions were not examined in depth and warrant further investigation. Future research should explore how academic, psychosocial, and structural factors intersect to shape graduate international students' experiences at HBCUs during periods of crisis.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a limited but growing body of scholarships by centering the voices of graduate international students at HBCUs and offering insight into how academic transitions were navigated during an unprecedented global disruption.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study, originally conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation (Brown-Grier, 2023), underscores the critical need for culturally responsive support systems for international students at HBCUs. This study examined how graduate international students at HBCUs experienced academic transitions during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how preexisting inequities were intensified under conditions of remote instruction. Although most participants had access to necessary technology, disruptions related to instructional delivery, classroom engagement, and language confidence shaped students' academic experiences. Faculty support emerged as a critical protective factor, underscoring the importance of relational and culturally responsive pedagogical practices at HBCUs during periods of crisis. At the same time, non-native English speakers

faced distinct challenges related to participation, peer interaction, and academic confidence, highlighting the need for intentional instructional design that supports linguistic diversity.

The findings underscore the values of inclusive teaching practices that extend beyond emergency response and into sustained faculty development. Incorporating global and non-Western perspectives into curricula, implementing accessible instructional tools such as recorded lectures and closed captions, and providing flexibility in assessment and participation can support more equitable learning environments for graduate international students. Together, these practices align with institutional commitments to global learning and inclusive excellence.

Future research should examine the long-term academic trajectories of graduate international students at HBCUs in the post-pandemic context, as well as how faculty sustain inclusive and culturally responsive practices across instructional modalities. By centering the voices of graduate international students, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that calls for more equitable, resilient, and student-centered approaches to international education within historically marginalized institutional context.

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