CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

Timed Out, Stressed Out, Chill Out: Making Sense of Fast Paced Online Graduate Teaching at HBCUs

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the advent of the most critical health crisis in over 100 years, COVID-19, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) along with their Predominantly White Institution (PWI) counterparts rushed to online learning in an attempt to keep students engaged and progressing toward a degree. This urgent shift left many faculty members, who might have had minimal or no previous experience teaching online, with little time to make the adjustment. The convenient solution of online course delivery may initially soothe those students and faculty members striving to escape the airborne public health threat involved with face-to-face teaching. However, an unmistakable panic pervaded the emergency shift to online education. Faculty and students continue to scramble to create meaningful online class experiences.

To address these concerns, I conducted a content analysis examining a four week online course in qualitative research methods. This HBCU course originally enrolled 24 doctoral students. Five dropped the course before it started referencing the pandemic or their stress about the course. Nineteen started the course and 17 completed the course. Final grades were one C, three B's, and 13 A's. Some students decided to drop the course due to family or work commitments, while a few others realized they enrolled in the incorrect class and withdrew before the course started. The following analysis chronicles some of the anxieties and successes in this harried cyber environment.

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"If you were to interview me pre-COVID, I would have raved about online learning. Although it was difficult with having a family and a busy career, I enjoy being able to learn in an asynchronous setting. But, in response to the pandemic, the online program felt like a muffled scream because everything was hitting me really fast at the same time...."

- HBCU respondent, June 27, 2020

IT'S A DIFFERENT WORLD THAN WHERE YOU COME FROM

This phrase is borrowed from the 1987 NBC television show which featured fictitious Hillman College, an HBCU in Virginia. As noted by Engram (2020), who also invoked the phrase in his discussion regarding African American students and their connectedness to their colleges and universities, HBCU students select such schools to connect with a supportive culture and to immerse themselves in a presumably safe educational space. The literature confirms that sense of belonging and feeling connected to the institution are not critical elements for student retention at any academic level (O'Meara, et al, 2017; Pascale, 2018; Wolf et al., 2017).

However, graduate schools have transitioned to a different world, that of online education. Colleges and universities are increasingly developing non-traditional online doctoral programs (Burras et al., 2019). Instead of traditional doctoral programs from decades past, which required candidates to literally leave their respective jobs and participate in an on-campus residency for at least a year, online programs allow access to graduate students who cannot exit their lives and careers to pursue a graduate degree. In this new and different world, graduate students continue to participate fully in their careers and families while simultaneously pursuing an advanced degree. The online degree format offers increased convenience (Watts, 2017) and additional revenue for universities (McPherson, & Bacow, 2015). Nonetheless, graduate students need that connectivity for success regardless of online or face-to-face delivery. Hence, graduate faculty should develop strategies that not only maintain the rigor of doctoral education but do such in an online

environment in which the doctoral student has simultaneously competing interests of career and family.

Unlike historically traditional graduate students who lived close to the campus, accessed a brick-and-mortar library, and learned through traditional face-to-face courses, the non- traditional doctoral students are often miles, even states away from campus. In some programs, doctoral students may not meet their respective dissertation committee chairs in person until commencement. The distance between students, the synchronous campus facilities, and academic personnel remain compelling; yet non-traditional doctoral students still need that sense of belonging to fortify progress to degree. The emerging conundrum for faculty and administration is 'how to develop that sense of belonging for doctoral students who seldom step foot on campus?'

Online doctoral students can connect to their doctoral programs through the faculty, through fellow students, and through the scholarship (Hill, 2014). To achieve such connections, faculty should offer continuous engagement and establish that students are welcomed to approach them via email, text, and video conferencing. Also, faculty mastery of content and mastery of the online class also connect graduate students to their programs (Horvitz, et al., 2013; Hyatt & Williams, 2011). While in converse, faculty who fumble through the online environment, do not use the online features, do not provide timely feedback, and fall from cyber sight lose students' interest and respect (Hill, 2014).

With these factors in mind, HBCUs should strive to train and support graduate faculty regarding the appropriate resources for online andragogy (Hilton & Felder, 2014). Scholars have noted that HBCUs remain underfunded by their respective states (Freeman & Lee, 2018). Similarly, Hill (2012) revealed that HBCUs still lag behind their White counterparts in providing comparable digital resources in the library and websites; these are the same resources non-traditional online graduate students need to connect with their respective HBCUs asynchronously.

In one of the few texts to examine HBCU graduate education, Palmer et. al. (2016) note that the HBCU faculty interaction with graduate students and positive experiences with the university support HBCU graduate students in their progress to degree. Further, Palmer et. al. (2016) also

confirmed that HBCU graduate students were concerned with disrespectful interactions with administrators and underfunded resources.

Consequently, the different world of online graduate education at HBCUs relies on faculty mastery and kindness to retain distance learning graduate students (Hollis, 2016; Leners, & Sitzman, 2006). Though the doctoral student experience may be increasingly moving to online modalities, the elements needed for success are consistent. The transition lies with how faculty and the university apply such elements in cyberspace.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

I chose qualitative content analysis as the research method because it allows for data analysis of materials which do not have a consistent unit of measure. Instead, the documents and materials are read for interpretation to derive meaning from various sources (Elo et. al., 2014; Schreier, 2012). Whether an inductive or deductive approach, qualitative content analysis relies upon the preparation of materials, the organization of such materials, the distillation of materials, and then reporting the results. For this data analysis, the research reflects Glaser (1998) and Holton (2007) who comment that analysis includes a constant questioning by the researcher engaged in coding. Such questions which remained foremost in my mind while coding are: 1) What is the purpose of the study? 2) Which phrases align with which emerging categories 3). What is the main concern being faced by participants? (Holton, 2007, p. 275).

Through this line-by-line analytical process, I verified the similarities and themes that address the stated research question for the analysis. Unlike quantitative analyses that rely on measurements and relating such measurement to a statistically normal distribution, the content analysis approach not only captures a phenomenon but allows the researcher to consider the tone and quality of the language in the materials. While coding, a researcher can extract emotions and sensitivities based on the word choices that respondents offer. Unlike Likert and binary measures found in quantitative inquiries, the coding in qualitative inquiries reveals depth, urgency, anxiety, or even exuberance often categorized as 'rich' and descriptive findings (Glaser & Holton, 2004). For these reasons, I found qualitative content analysis helpful in not only addressing the phenomenon for study but aiding interpretation of respondents' concerns.

RESEARCH SETTING

The data for this content analysis emanates from an online course taught at an HBCU in June and July 2020. Typically, an online doctoral course enrolls seven to ten students. Due to cost-saving measures, three cohorts of students were enrolled in one section, with the initial enrollment at 24 doctoral students, 19 stayed through the drop/add period to continue with the course. The course, Introduction to Qualitative Research, is a core requirement in the doctoral program; students must earn a "B" or

better to advance. The course management system, Canvas, opened two weeks in advance to the start of class, for all professors teaching in the summer, yet students could not enter until the first day of class.

All of the students were Black or of mixed race. Of the 19 students who continued through the class, 17 were women and two were men. All reported that they were familiar with Canvas and had taken online courses previously.

The central research question for this content analysis was:
- What are the lived experiences of HBCU doctoral students enrolled in an online, fast-paced research course?

Two sub-questions also guided the study:
- What elements or factors supported HBCU doctoral students in the online, fast-paced research course?
- What elements or factors hindered HBCU doctoral students in the online, fast-paced research course?

The materials analyzed for the qualitative content analysis include:
- 74 emails between students and me
- 76 reflective paragraphs that students submitted during the course as part of their written assignments
- 1 faculty evaluation
- 1 syllabus
- 25 simultaneous "announcements" to the class throughout the course 4.5-week session

In advance of the course, I told students I planned to assess the class for performance to develop recommendations for other online faculty members.

FINDINGS

I identified three themes from the course materials. In my findings, I found that time was a salient issue throughout the course: timing of the course (two months into a pandemic), the limited time to take the course, and time management for doctoral students managing competing work, life, and school responsibilities. I attempted to mitigate time issues

by distributing the syllabus to learners two weeks before class started; they had extra time to prepare for a course that required a paper every week. Time was also a detriment. In such a short class, students needed to be laser-focused in completing assignments and submitting such on time while also maintaining various work and family commitments. I gave a three-day grace period for assignments (with a late penalty), also circulated reminders through the 'announce' function and during the Zoom synchronous meetings. With the intention of keeping students engaged, I designed various strategies in hopes of stronger academic performances from students (Deschaine & Whale, 2017). These findings are important as more doctoral programs from any type of school developing more non-residential, online doctoral programs for working adults (Deschaine & Whale, 2017; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The findings below also coincide with Visser (2002) who supports Boston and Gregory's (2015) finding that constant motivational messages to students from the faculty increased completion rates. Additionally, advising students before class about the fast-paced nature and over-enrollment helped them to cope with the anticipated stress of family responsibilities and graduate work (Ramos & Borte, 2012).

Theme 1: Panic
When the course opened in the first week of June, the doctoral students had just endured the pandemic related transition of the university closing, their respective jobs changing, and children sent home. One student commented, "I'm just a bit panicked and don't want to get caught in the paralysis of analysis." Another student reflected on the pandemic, "The last few months I believe have been difficult for many (myself included). I don't know anyone who has not been affected in some way by what is occurring in our country and the world." The doctoral students also felt stress in balancing work and school. In reaction to comments in the Zoom meeting, I wrote to a student, "I heard you in the Zoom class meetings- that you are totally overloaded with courses and work from your job, and now this class which moves at lightning speed." Another sign of the times was documented by a student in mid-June, "The semester started stormy for me and my family (my daughter was in the hospital that first week of class), therefore my focus and concentration were affected."

Faculty can anticipate the stress that non-traditional doctoral students feel. Work-life balance and competing responsibilities understandably contribute to the panic (Ramos & Borte, 2012). Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic and related university shutdowns, in the midst of racial stress reported weekly during Summer 2020, only exacerbated anxiety for HBCU graduate students. Nonetheless, the tremendous anxiety of this historical moment laid bare the conflicting realities that online, non-residential doctoral students manage.

Theme 2: Structure/Time

The structure of the course in the summer is 4.5 weeks, a third of the traditional semester course in which students were required to learn qualitative research methods. The abbreviated class format was already noted as a hindrance for students, yet this was the assigned window for me to engage 19 doctoral students in a class that was a critical cornerstone of their doctoral program. As researchers suggest, time management, metacognition, and regulation are important factors in online learning success. Therefore, a professor who offers kind reminders and encourages time management is helping graduate students to adapt their learning to the asynchronous learning environment (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

At the end of the course, one student commented "I think the 4-week class was too short. It felt like things were rushed." Recognizing the pressure of learning research methods and balancing other responsibilities another student commented, "I would benefit from best research and time management practices for a student working full-time with a family." Other comments included, "I was nervous about completing so much work in four and a half weeks." Further, a student remarked, "I had to learn fairly quickly on how to incorporate time management into my daily life with work duties and class assignments. I truly appreciate the professor provides everything in the beginning and updating the class every other day."

Theme 3: Kind & Consistent Engagement

In an educational environment, students take their cues from the leader, in this case, myself. The syllabus specifically gave a hyperlink to a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "Advice on being advised" (Dush, 2016) so students knew my expectations on congeniality online. Being kind and

empathetic in the face of stress helped students persist through difficulties (Hollis, 2016; Wang 2012). Throughout the course, though frustrated, students felt they had constant contact with me. As the professor, I remarked "I know this is a crazy time …. Our country and Covid…" In response to a student who asked about a grade, I stated, "Hey you earned it [the higher grade]. I appreciate your writing." In another response, I wrote to a student, "I totally empathize with the pressure you are feeling with everything you are juggling." Within this kindness, I remained firm about deadlines, writing proficiency, and quality work. In response, student wrote to me, " I just wanted to say thank you for the compliments on my writing…", or "thank you in advance for supporting me."

In addition to Zoom meetings, I created MP4 recordings about doctoral writing, time management, and correcting passive voice. Students' reactions included, "I just want to thank you for this video. I never knew

what passive voice was and why it came when I was writing a paper. I now keep your video up as I am writing my papers. Thank you." In an individual assignment reflection, a student wrote, " Positive feedback was encouraging…" Students' responses dovetailed with the faculty evaluation in which I demonstrated control of the class and mastery of the subject. My engagement and responsiveness to students, typically in 24 hours, allowed students to feel part of a community and not waiting endlessly for answers, especially in a fast-paced course. The students' comments are consistent with Reiff and Ballin, (2016) who confirm that online students consider professors' responsiveness and respectfulness to create an engaging online learning environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comments made by the doctoral students, the following recommendations are offered to assist faculty as they engage online with panicked graduate students. Though this analysis is on HBCU graduate students, the strategies apply to online learning overall.

1. Faculty members should distribute the syllabus as early as possible before class starts. Once the reading list is solidified, let students prepare for the assignments. If the instructor anticipates minor changes, alert the students to these possibilities.
2. The students appreciated synchronous meetings even within the asynchronous format. While all of the students had taken online courses with minimal face-to-face interaction, they seemed to crave in-person interaction in a fast-paced course during the pandemic. In a historical moment with limited face-to-face contact within our communities, the students appreciated being able to connect with classmates and the professor via Zoom.
3. Students commented that consistent interaction and content mastery from the faculty alleviated their stress. Seeing the faculty member's prior qualitative research confirmed mastery of the subject for the students. Such confidence soothed anxiety. Online learners also need consistent engagement, which manifested itself in utilizing the announcement features for updates and positive support. Further, faculty members should check their emails twice a day for student correspondence.
4. Students connected to the course materials and writing strategies through the short videos created by the professor. For this course, I created three short videos on passive voice, writing strategies, and tips for staying on pace in a short class. The MP4 videos were no longer than 10-12 minutes and students could watch them at their convenience
5. As noted in the opening respondent's comment, students felt immense anxiety and panic. The over-enrolled course, understandably designed to save the university money, also frustrated students. Faculty members who overtly provide empathy and understanding in addition to the mastery help students recognize that they can be successful despite the challenges in the class structure.
6. The faculty member setting a clear structure and expectations is particularly important. Empathy cannot seep into granting extensions and allowing sloppy work. Students will gauge their pace and expectations from the faculty member. If the faculty member is too lenient, students will accept that in their scholarship and carry such diminished expectations into their dissertation research. The faculty member who can balance care and empathy with structured insistence for academic excellence proactively manages expectation with a kind touch.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary higher education continues to weather the immeasurable challenges during the most disruptive public health crisis in over a century. Declining enrollment and souring financial problems are evolving from the intermittent to the norm in this environment. Added to this mix is the pervasive social justice unrest nationally. Nonetheless, despite these tensions, with some ingenuity and empathy, graduate faculty can still develop innovative learning spaces online.

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