# A Qualitative Investigation of the Academic, Social and Emotional Needs of Graduate Students Post COVID-19: Recommendations for Graduate Faculty

Carianne Bernadowski
Education Department, Robert Morris University, Moon Township, USA

## Abstract

This paper examines graduate students' academic and emotional needs as they returned to campus after the abrupt shutdown of universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because graduate students are unique in their mindset, learning, and needs, examining how they perceived their needs when they returned to graduate school was imperative. Based on focus groups and semi-structured interview data, three themes emerged: obstacles to balancing home, work and school, graduate students' needs are diverse, and social and emotional needs should be at the heart of graduate studies. These findings suggest strategies to integrate more culturally relevant and social and emotional approaches to graduate teaching.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, culturally relevant teaching, graduate students, social-emotional learning, work-life balance

## Introduction

The emergence, importance and emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) in the k-12 sector are central to teaching pedagogy for young children. However, after adult learners returned to classrooms after and during the global COVID-19 pandemic, they too needed time to care for themselves emotionally, physically and socially. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is often described as "the development of information, mindsets, and skills that allow individuals to identify and manage their emotions, enhance their awareness of and empathy of others, and establish and work toward personal goals" (Stocker & Gallagher, 2019, p. 25). The strategies are used in k-12 schools, but this framework can also inform the graduate student population. Within the context of higher education, specifically graduate school, students often experience stress and anxiety, which negatively impact performance in coursework (Engle et al., 1999; Sepp, 1991).

Moreover, andragogy (Knowles, 1970), specific to adult learning, states that adults have unique, distinct and specific learning needs and the pandemic highlighted these like never before. Within the premise of andragogy, adult learners approach coursework with prior experiences that can be used to build knowledge and mental models and desire learning experiences that are meaningful and applicable to real-world situations immediately (Bale & Dudney, 2000; Cooper & Henschke, 2004). Moreover, andragogy capitalizes on open communication between students and teachers and classroom assignments and activities that create learner engagement connected to their personal and work lives. Intrinsic motivation situates learning this way (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students found themselves in a unique situation where the home-life-school balance was ever so precarious. As graduate students reentered college classrooms, they reacclimated to a new world where they had to continue their studies.

## Review of the Related Literature

**CRT-SEL model.** Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogical approach that allows teachers to build a classroom environment where social and emotional learning (SEL) promotes success for students (Yeh et al., 2022). Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the unique cultural situations of all students (Landson-Billings, 1994). Using a CRT-SEL approach, students learn in an environment that provides support that facilitates authentic learning (Jones et al., 2013; Yeh et al., 2022). Current literature suggests that teachers at all levels must develop culturally responsive social-emotional learning skills (Hammond, 2014) that positively impact their emotional resilience (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). The benefits of implementing such practices enhance "understanding the different perspectives of the issues, appreciating each other's strengths, and building empathy" (Yeh et al., 2022, p. 21). Furthermore, Hammond (2014) argues that higher education faculty who adopt a CRT-SEL framework for teaching international students can better facilitate academic achievement and overall development.

**SEL in higher education.** Social and emotional learning strategies in higher education have shown improved academic achievement (Wang et al., 2012), career achievement (Conley et al., 2015), improved interpersonal relationships and better mental health (Conley et al., 2015). However, much of the work done in IHE has focused on international undergraduate students and failed to recognize the unique needs of graduate students. Within the framework of CRT-SEL, the adult student plays a critically important role in graduate students' behavior (Sciuchetti, 2017), retention (Gloria & Ho, 2003), and achievement (Parker et al., 2005). Yet, Yeh et al. (2020) found that university faculty are ill-equipped and undertrained to integrate CRT-SEL pedagogies into their classrooms. Finally, SEL competencies lead to positive student outcomes when mindful awareness of students' needs is addressed in classrooms at all levels. Those unique needs can be easily met without course and curricular changes.

**Adult learning theory.** Working with adult students presents unique challenges and intense opportunities. Effective adult education is informed by the theory that helps shape and ground higher education faculty in providing authentic learning tasks that foster critical thinking and engagement with the world in which they live and work. However, adult students also allow university faculty to reflect on their practices and academic disciplines. One of the major adult learning theories Knowles (1970) developed, andragogy, helped situate adult experiences in school, which differed significantly from children. Descriptions of adults, such as they are internally motivated instead of externally motivated, helped faculty understand that to support adults in their pursuit of a degree, learning outcomes and opportunities would have to differ to make a difference. Ultimately, Knowles recognized that "making the adult classroom a place suitable for adults both physically and psychologically" (Merriam, 2017, p. 24) would be beneficial. The transformation of adult learning from a primary behaviorist approach to a prominent theory in sociology has helped raise awareness of adult students' social and emotional needs. Dzubinski et al. (2012) argue that like children in our k-12 schools, adults crave curricular opportunities and learning experiences that help them embrace innovation in a complex global society. The global event of the COVID-19 pandemic shines a light on this need even more in today's graduate classrooms.

### Objectives

This study's objective is to examine the social and emotional needs identified by graduate students as they returned to in-person instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the perceptions of this population provide invaluable insight into the obstacles many faces as they reenter college classrooms.

### Research Questions

Three research questions were examined:
1. What are the academic needs of graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the emotional needs of graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What strategies can be used to support graduate students in classrooms?

### Methodology

Qualitative methodology was utilized in this instrumental case study, was bound by the confines of graduate-level adult learners, and was designed to "go beyond the case" (Stake, 2006, p. 8). This allowed the researcher to focus on understanding the issues of the lived experience of the participants, and this in-depth exploration helped to understand the phenomenon intensively. In addition, this study examined graduate students' perceptions of their emotional and academic needs post-pandemic. Based on prior work by Parker et al. (2021) with undergraduate students, graduate students have unique needs while balancing work and home commitments.

A purposeful sample of graduate students, who returned to campus after the COVID-19 school closure, was utilized, and volunteers were recruited from one small, private university in the United States. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews served as a vehicle to gather relevant data to answer the research questions. Initially, a focus group of one cohort of graduate students (n = 8) was used to garner data and then semi-structured interviews with an additional seven (07) participants were conducted. Themes emerged from the data from 15 participants and saturation was achieved with the sample. The focus group and interviews were recorded and transcribed then inductive content analysis was implemented to develop categories from the data. Member checking added credibility and trustworthiness to the study.

### Results

Data were categorized into three overarching themes: obstacles to balancing professional and personal lives were difficult, graduate students' needs were dynamic, and social and emotional needs should be at the heart of graduate studies.

Theme 1: Obstacles to balancing professional and personal lives

All participants (*N* = 15) referred to the responsibilities of attending school and juggling home and work. As the head of the household, many graduate students mentioned that school fell to the bottom of the list when prioritizing their responsibilities. Participant (P)3 stated, "How can I help my family, coworkers and classmates when I did not know how to help myself or even what I needed? It was hard. One of the hardest things I have had to do…school shut down shortly after I enrolled in grad school." This sentiment is felt throughout the focus groups as well. FGP 2 mentioned, "I was lost. My kids did not know what was happening and this was so stressful. At the same time, I was trying to attend class while they were always home. After their school day ended, I would make dinner and jump online to attend a virtual class, go to bed and do it again the next day." Other obstacles described included financial hardships, childcare issues, overwhelming anxiety, mental health concerns and food insecurity for family and friends. Of the participants, 13 of the 15 mentioned some disconnect from their "normal lives," which was unsettling and unmanageable. Focus group participant (FGP) 5 stated, "I am going to be honest and tell you I had no idea what to do. I was so sad not to have the comradery of my classmates and I was lost in the coursework. We are a close group that works well together in an environment where I was thriving and learning together." The prevalence of feeling overwhelmed with all the responsibilities of being a graduate student was present.

Theme 2: Graduate students' needs are diverse

One common thread found throughout the focus groups and interviews was that graduate students' needs are ever-changing and often forgotten by higher education institutions. Graduate students are typically part-time students who attend either online or on campus in the evenings while working full-time and often tending to a family. They are often a diverse group academically, socially, ethnically and economically. This dynamic makes them disconnected from campus life and resources. One common area mentioned by participants was that their social, emotional and psychological needs were not met during the shutdown and eventual reentry to school. P7 mentioned, "I felt forgotten by the university, to be honest, but at the same time, I wanted to forget I was enrolled in graduate school." Other participants mentioned that adult students are unique and different from university students. For instance, FGP1 stated, "I needed many things that were probably different than what young students needed. I am not saying my needs are more important, but they were different. Many of the professors failed to realize that." The forgotten student body felt abandoned by the university and confused by what was happening in a global society. P8 stated, "I do not think we heard from the administration once. We received canned emails, but the situation felt so cold and official." Finally,14 of the 15 participants mentioned that support from their course instructors was also lacking.

Theme 3: Social and emotional needs should be at the heart of graduate studies

Participants discussed, in detail, their need for special attention to their unique and varying needs as adult students. For example, FCP7 stated, "I think our needs are even more important post-COVID-19. I've had many other worries besides school, family, and work than in the past. I just need a break sometimes." Likewise, FCP6 added, "Never have I ever had so many things pulling me in so many directions. Sometimes I need grace." At the center of this theme is the awareness of emotional needs that may be unique to adult learners. P3 stated, "Money is a major concern, so I must work overtime to pay my bills, including tuition. Time is so limited." Flexible deadlines and grading policies may be one way to help alleviate some of the stressors associated with the emotional needs of graduate students. These needs may have been highlighted during the pandemic.

### Discussion

Unarguably, adult students have unique circumstances that is often discussed in the adult learning theory, andragogy, first proposed by Knowles (1970). Andragogy proposes that adults enter the classroom with prior knowledge and vast experiences that make their learning situations unique and adults want to engage with

content that is meaningful to their lives and can be applied to their personal to work lives immediately (Bale & Dudney, 2000; Cooper & Henschke, 2004). This is important in the context of learning during a pandemic. The emotional cushion they may need is to juggle real-world experiences with the learner at the center of the content while respecting their exceptional circumstances amid a crisis. Understanding that adults must prioritize and given the personal circumstances of many learners in this new world, instructors must rethink and reimagine their teaching methods.

The study focused on the lived experiences of a small sample of graduate students, a limitation of the study, returning to school post COVID-19, and participants discussed the struggles of balancing home, work and school in a new normal and the university did not address these considerations. With declining graduate school enrollment nationwide, it is imperative to reimagine what typical school looked like to this unique population. This study contributes to practice and speaks to the value of classroom community practices.

Since graduate students are often disconnected from the college culture and closely connected to work and family, they must be provided with a sense of community within the classroom. When COVID-19 closed the doors of universities worldwide, finding ways to connect with students became even more complex and students' disconnection from the classroom became even more evident. Traditional SEL practices had to transition quickly in a synchronous virtual environment.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to help build classroom community and a sense of belonging for adult students in a post-COVID-19 classroom.

1. **Weekly check-in.** In a traditional face-to-face classroom, instructors must provide a confidential way for students to "check in" emotionally and academically with the instructor. This is often accomplished through student and teacher interactions before or after class, but in a virtual environment, a Google Form with a straightforward question: do you need a check-in? Can provide the vehicle busy graduate students may need. In addition, the opportunity to open the lines of communication can help students feel connected.

2. **Open door policies.** Ensuring students understand that their family is an integral part of their educational journey and creating a classroom culture that nurtures andragogy is essential. Open door policies include allowing students to bring children to class if the babysitter cancels or leaves the classroom to take a phone call or other personal needs. Additionally, reinforcement that "family first" is a priority in your classroom sends a message to your students. This policy applies to students and instructors alike. Simple gestures give graduate students a sense of belonging and reduce their anxiety, eliminating obstacles to learning.

3. **Weekly round tables.** A weekly roundtable is a way to begin classes to discuss what is on students' minds. Students place topics in a basket as they enter the classroom (or in a private chat online or anonymous Google Form). As students enter the brick-and-mortar classroom, they are provided with small slips of paper and freely write a topic for discussion. Another option is to send a Google Form before class so the instructor can prioritize topics for discussion. If time does not permit for a weekly roundtable, a follow-up email to the class (or individual) with the topics and your response is a way to ensure all students have a voice in the classroom. Holding virtual office hours to future discuss a topic might be necessary.

4. **Padlets for extended learning and sharing.** Padlets are an effective way to allow students to share something of value, whether it be "surviving a doctoral program" or "research tips and tricks" in an electronic format housed in one place. They can be a way to encourage engagement, professional knowledge sharing, and accountability. Padlets can be created at https://padlet.com.

5. **Personalized emails.** As a semester ends, students must leave your course with a sense of accomplishment and connection. Typically, a full class email is an effective way to wrap up thoughts on the semester, but each student receives a follow-up email highlighting academic and personal accomplishments. For example, telling students what you admire about them as human beings and celebrating the work they were able to accomplish during the course can set the tone for their journey in graduate school. To keep track of personal, professional and academic accomplishments, the instructor can write down or dictate notes into a phone immediately following each class session. Spreadsheets can also be utilized.

6. **Teach positive self-talk.** Instructors have the unique opportunity to help their adult students see the positives in their work. Begin each class with a simple prompt such as "This week I did _____well" or "Today was a good day because _____." Starting class with small victories sets the tone for the class.

7. **Exit tickets.** Exit tickets have long been used as a formative assessment tool, but instructors can use this strategy to check on the mental well-being of students. On a slip of paper or in a Google Form, the instructor can ask: How do you feel? What do you need? What do you need to know more about? What do I need to know? This data can be used to inform pedagogy and instructors' interactions with students.

8. **Class agendas-sharing class session objectives.** Instructors share their course syllabus and the coursework expectations, but sharing a class agenda/lesson plan with the class can help graduate students make informed decisions. Students, who know what will be learned in the class session, can make decisions based on what is being taught and when. For instance, if a student is running late for class, they may ask if you can move content around, so they do not miss a particular topic. This gesture can help those students who want to use the agenda as a sort of "to-do" list as they progress through the day's lesson. Some students will find the agenda helpful in staying engaged in course content.

The above eight simple strategies can assist instructors in capitalizing on adult learning theory tenants and seamlessly integrating social and emotional strategies to support graduate students' growth and development.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to revise and reimagine how they delivered instruction, managed student concerns and met the needs of students in a new environment. Moreover, many may argue that graduate students have even more diverse needs than a traditional student population. Family and work obligations were at the forefront of their concerns as adult learners. The limitations of this study highlight the small sample size, but the qualitative findings can inform what faculty consider when building course content and interactions with and by students.

## References

Bale, J. M., & Dudney, D. (2000). Teaching Generation X: Do andragogical learning principles apply to undergraduate finance education? *Financial Practice and Education*, *10*, 216–227.

Cennamo, L., & Gardner, D. (2008). Generational differences in work values, outcomes and person-organisation values fit. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *23*(8), 891–906. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940810904385

Conley, C. S., Durlak, J. A., & Kirsch, A. C. (2015). A meta-analysis of universal mental health prevention programs for higher education students. *Prevention Science*, *16*(4), 487–507. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0543-1

Cooper, M. K., & Henschke, J. A. (2004). Additional thinking about andragogy: The international foundation for its research, theory and practice linkage in adult education and human resource development. Presentation given at The Commission of Professors at Adult Education Conference, Louisville, KY.

Donahue-Keegan, D., Villegas-Reimers, E., & Cressey, J. (2019). Integrating social-emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching in teacher education preparation programs: *The Massachusetts experience so far*.

Dzubinski, L., Hentz, B., Davis, K. L., & Nicolaides, A. (2012). Envisioning an adult learning graduate program for the early 21st century: A developmental action inquiry study. *Adult Learning*, *23*(3), 103–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159512452844

Engle, R. W., Tuholski, S. W., Laughlin, J. E., & Conway, A. R. A. (1999). Working memory, short-term memory, and general fluid intelligence: A latent-variable approach. *Journal of Experimental Psychology. General*, *128*(3), 309–331. https://doi.org/10.1037//0096-3445.128.3.309

Gloria, A. M., & Ho, T. A. (2003). Environmental, social, and psychological experiences of Asian American undergraduates: Examining issues of academic persistence. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *81*(1), 93–105. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00230.x

Hammond, Z. L. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

Jones, S. M., Bouffard, S. M., & Weissbourd, R. (2013, May). Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *94*(8), 62–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171309400815

Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*. Association Press.

Landson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B. (2017). Adult learning theory: Evolution and future directions. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, *26*, 21–37.

Parker, J., Duffy, J., Wood, L., Bond, B., & Hogan, M. (2005). Academic achievement and emotional intelligence: Predicting the successful transition from high school to university. *Journal of First-Year Experience*, *17*(1), 1–12.

Parker, S. W., Hansen, M. A., & Bernadowski, C. (2021). COVID-19 campus closures in the United States: American student perceptions of forced transition to remote learning. *Social Sciences*, *10*(2), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10020062

Sciuchetti, M. B. (2017). Addressing inequity in special education: An integrated framework for culturally responsive social emotional practice. *Psychology in the Schools*, *54*(10), 1245–1251. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22073

Seipp, B. (1991). Anxiety and academic performance: A meta-analysis of findings. *Anxiety Research*, *4*(1), 27–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/08917779108248762

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford Press.

Stocker, S. L., & Gallagher, K. M. (2019). Alleviating Anxiety and Altering Appraisals: Social-Emotional Learning in the College Classroom. *College Teaching*, *67*(1), 23–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2018.1515722

Wang, N., Wilhite, S. C., Wyatt, J., Young, T., Bloemker, G., & Wilhite, E. (2012). Impact of a college freshman social and emotional learning curriculum on student learning outcomes: An exploratory study. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, *9*(2), 120–140. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.9.2.8

Yeh, E., Sharma, R., Jaiswal-Oliver, M., & Wan, G. (2022). Culturally responsive social-emotional learning for international students: Professional development for higher education. *Journal of International Students*, *12*(1), 19–41. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i1.2976