

# Teaching and Learning in the Midst of COVID-19: The Impact of Locus of Control on Emotional and Professional Survival during a Global Pandemic

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**Abstract:** This treatise represents the lived experiences of an assistant professor of social work/MSW admissions director and three first year MSW students as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and participated in an online instructional platform. The experiences and adaptive skills of the MSW students are presented in their own voice. The disappointments, distractions, disruptions in family relationships, and absence of actual human interaction with peers and professors are relayed from each contributor's perspective. Adaptive techniques employed by each student and the assistant professor are discussed from a locus of control perspective. Recommendations for future research are offered as they relate to the emotional and physical concerns experienced by faculty and students during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** locus of control, resilience, social work

As an assistant professor and MSW admissions director for The Ethelyn R. Strong School of Social Work, I (Val) am often presented with the challenge of responding to student crises, institutional changes, and periodic weather-related disasters. In January 2020, I became aware of a new virus in China, but I was indifferent since it did not appear to be affecting the U.S. Within a few weeks, COVID-19 emerged as a worldwide phenomenon and severely impacted my duties as the admissions director by prohibiting in-person attendance at graduate school fairs, open houses, career fairs, and MSW information sessions. I did not have teaching responsibilities during spring 2020 and therefore experienced less of the anxiety related to the fast-paced move to an online class format. Like other faculty, I was required to participate in a two-week online instructor training designed to assist faculty in acquiring and mastering the skills needed to provide a remote synchronous class format. By the end of March, I had completed my certified online instructor training and was now able to conduct classes, meetings, and interviews virtually. My biggest fear had centered around the idea that I would not have sufficient mastery of the various online platforms and tools such as Zoom, Blackboard, Socrative, or Kahoot. I tested a number of tools in advance and felt reasonably comfortable that I would be able to conduct my fall class with few problems. My anxiety level diminished considerably. Despite this confidence, I remained hopeful that my fall class would be in-person.

During spring 2020, I screened 84 applications for admission to the program, interviewed 60 applicants, and admitted 50 for summer and fall 2020. We encountered a number of technology issues conducting applicant interviews virtually as applicants experienced problems with bandwidth and Wi-Fi. One applicant interviewed in their car using a cell phone. Like other institutions of higher education, we soon discovered that some of our students and applicants were "socially disadvantaged" because they lacked access to technology and the internet (Crawford et al., 2020, p. 2). Despite my online instructor training and numerous platform

options, I was not a fan of this technology because I now had a good idea of the types of technology glitches that might occur.

As the months passed, accepted students began to email me regarding the platform for summer and fall classes. We were uncertain of the instructional platform until a few weeks before classes were scheduled to start, partially due to the university's need to abide by guidance from the governor. Once it was announced that most classes would be online, several students withdrew from the program. Two weeks before fall classes were scheduled to start, the university announced that all classes would be virtual for the first two weeks and then transition to the traditional in-person format. I was thrilled to hear that I might be able to conduct my foundation level course, Social Work Profession, in-person. The technology issues I had experienced with the virtual applicant interviews and virtual meetings had dampened my enthusiasm for virtual classroom instruction.

The online class format required a considerable amount of preparation in advance of class starts: Welcome messages had to be developed, course syllabi needed to be adjusted to reflect online instruction, and contact methods and virtual office hours had to be identified since faculty would not have traditional office hours. Assignments, quizzes, and PowerPoints had to be uploaded. Inserting videos for classroom viewing was unpredictable, as I found that sometimes the system would work and sometimes it did not. I searched for ideas to make my virtual class as engaging as it would have been with face-to-face instruction. I was able to use breakout groups and guest speakers with relative ease on my part, but the guest speakers sometimes experienced problems signing into the online platform.

The first day of my fall 2020 class was spent showing students how to navigate Blackboard, where to find assignments including discussion boards, and how to submit their assignments. The learning curve was a bit slower for some of the non-traditional students who had not been in class for 10 or more years. As part of the first day of class, students were asked to introduce themselves and speak about what attracted them to the field of social work. Of 11 students, only two had undergraduate degrees in social work. Additionally, I thought it was important to ask students how they felt about the virtual instruction. A number of students did not appear pleased that the instruction would be virtual. While millennials are tech savvy, many were not pleased with the movement to online instruction as indicated by global responses to this newly mandated platform (Crawford et al., 2020; Jackson-Nevels et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020). One of my students had traveled from Korea to pursue her master's degree and expressed her disappointment at being deprived of the campus experience. Another non-traditional student indicated that she had been looking forward to coming to campus to again experience life as a college student. As the two-week period of the initial virtual instruction passed, several students asked when the class would assume the in-person format. The students were advised that only a few select courses would experience a face-to-face format, but our class would remain virtual. There was true disappointment for many of my students. They were uncertain how they might develop friendships and study groups to successfully navigate graduate school.

In the first few weeks of class, I incorporated a few YouTube videos to generate class discussions and also to infuse a bit of humor. I believe that humor and laughter are good during times of stress. We viewed “It’s Not About the Nail” (Headley, 2013) to discuss communication issues between men and women. This video provided an opportunity to share a laugh. To help students understand that the pursuit of a graduate education required determination, we viewed “Famous Failures” (Motivating Success, 2012) and discussed the implications for self-determination. Each student was asked to take the Grit Test (Duckworth et al., 2007) and the Learning Styles Assessment (Learning-Styles-Online.com, n.d.) to identify how they learned and how much determination they possessed. Each assignment was designed to empower students in their quest for a graduate education.

On a weekly basis, I would conduct wellness checks with the students during the first few minutes of class to gauge their emotional and physical response to COVID-19 and the virtual learning platform. Over time, students began adjusting to the idea of virtual classes, though they still hoped the next semester would be different. While attending to the emotional needs of my students, I began to realize that I was succumbing to the emotional weight of the pandemic. In response to the governor’s restrictions about where we could go, how many people could gather, and the closing of department stores, restaurants, and movie theaters, my spirits began to ebb and my energy level hit new lows. I was frequently tired and had difficulty sleeping. I realized that I needed to do something to keep myself out of the abyss of “the new normal.” Feeling powerless is debilitating, and I realized that I needed to take control of how I would experience this pandemic. I fought hard emotionally to reject the idea of “the new normal” while still abiding by CDC guidance. To elevate my spirits, I began visiting home improvement stores to redecorate my home and engage in some much needed landscaping. This became a weekly activity for several months and helped me elude the COVID-19 abyss.

Initially, I saw myself as a victim, but this was not a role that was comfortable for me. I repeatedly had to remind myself that I was not a victim, but instead an active participant in my life direction. It was at this point that I realized I needed to take more control despite the pandemic and environmental restrictions. As restaurants were allowed to reopen, first with outside dining and then with occupancy restrictions for inside dining, I was able to make these restrictions work for me. Hand sanitizer, gloves, disinfecting wipes, social distancing, and face masks were the safeguards that allowed me some semblance of my former life.

Midway through the semester, I discovered that my sister had contracted COVID-19 and was extremely ill. Fear surfaced on so many levels. I had been eating out on a weekly basis in my attempt to establish my “new normal,” but my sister had contracted this disease by staying home. For four months, she did not leave her house except for essentials and did not allow visitors. This made no sense to me. I began to question my new normal of eating out and shopping. The fear that my sister might actually succumb to this illness began to impact my emotional stability. I knew the emotional danger of isolation and had developed what I believed to be a viable and safe alternative to total isolation. I was provided this information about my

sister the day before my Tuesday morning class. As I gathered materials for my class, emotionally I felt ill-prepared to instruct my students. I considered cancelling my class, but I reminded myself that I was not a victim, but the instructor for my class. I engaged my class for the three-hour period and felt more in control for doing so. Over a period of a month, my sister slowly recovered from the deadly virus.

Within a few weeks of my sister's recovery, one of my students advised me that she had contracted COVID-19 through her internship. While she appeared weak, she advised me that hers was a mild case. Her illness developed just before she was scheduled to participate in a group presentation. I advised the student that she would certainly be excused from the presentation due to her illness, but she chose to present with her cohort. Bettinger and Loeb (2017) identified the flexibility of online classes as a benefit for students and this certainly proved valuable for my student. Had this student been engaged in the traditional face-to-face classroom, she would have been unable to present with her group due to risk of exposing others to her illness.

For graduate social work students, there was also a requirement for field practicum. Early in the semester, many students discovered that their field placements had to be altered or changed to meet Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requirements. Several practicum sites were no longer able to provide internship opportunities due to temporary closures. Some sites provided students with opportunities for telehealth services that allowed students to provide virtual assistance to clients from their home or dorm. A few sites reopened with limited hours but were still able to provide internship opportunities for our students. As the semester came to an end, I became aware that several students had contracted COVID-19 at their internship sites. These students observed the required 14-day quarantine and, despite contracting COVID-19, many returned to successfully complete their internship and the semester.

Several weeks prior to the end of my Social Work Profession class, I asked my students if they might be interested in sharing their thoughts and feelings about their graduate education and how their learning was affected by the pandemic. It was my hope that writing about their experience would be cathartic while also reinforcing their determination to move forward despite the uncertainty of a cure. Three students indicated an interest in sharing their story. Angela was a non-traditional student who had been in the workforce for more than seven years living abroad in Korea. Kayla entered the MSW program immediately after completing her undergraduate education and contracted COVID-19 during her first year as an MSW student. Briana was also a traditional student, entering the MSW program immediately after obtaining her undergraduate degree. Each student experienced disappointment related to how they expected their first year of graduate education to progress. Yet, each student discovered qualities within themselves that allowed them to take control and successfully navigate the horrors of a global pandemic. Some might describe this phenomenon as resilience, but van Breda (2018) suggests that resilience is a process as well as an outcome. Resilience as a process suggests the perception of having control over one's circumstances. The student stories presented reflect an internal locus of control in

how they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as they progressed through their first year of graduate school. These students were also in the midst of a second pandemic—lethal policing. While the students do not discuss the impact of lethal policing and the Black Lives Matter movement, it is important to understand they were experiencing two pandemics. Two of the students were mixed-race and could have easily been a victim of lethal policing. The third student was Caucasian and might be expected to enjoy more privilege with respect to how she experienced both pandemics.

### **“Disappointment in Efforts” ... Angela’s Story**

The COVID-19 outbreak occurred during my time teaching English in South Korea. My sister Tonya and I moved to South Korea in 2013 and later met our best friend, Nathalie, during our time there. She had become like another sister to us. As our time in Korea was coming to an end, the three of us planned a final trip to Malaysia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, beginning on January 17, 2020. We were well into the second country of our three-country vacation when I first heard about the COVID-19 outbreak. My sister, Nathalie, and I were in Cambodia when I was scrolling through social media and a news article about an outbreak surfaced on my cellphone. We talked about it briefly, thinking it was just a new virus that people were catching, and did not think much more about it. It was not until we were flying back to South Korea on February 2, 2020, at the completion of our “sister vacation,” that I began to understand the severity of this disease. The death rate was drastically increasing in the Asian countries and, within just a couple of weeks, South Korea was in disarray.

Earlier in 2019, I decided to leave South Korea to pursue a master’s degree in social work. I finally knew what I wanted to do as a career and was eager to move back to the U.S. and begin my journey. I applied to a historically black college/university (HBCU) because I had never experienced that type of atmosphere. I was excited about attending an HBCU and experiencing campus life again. Despite my excitement about returning to college, the news was flooded with stories of skyrocketing numbers of people infected with the virus.

South Korea, fortunately, was able to gain some control of the situation. The first confirmed COVID-19 patient in South Korea was on January 20, 2020 (Cha & Kim, 2020). By February 17, 2020, there were 30 COVID-19 confirmed cases. It was not until “Patient 31” that the number of COVID-19 patients increased out of control. This patient lived in the third largest city in South Korea: Daegu (Cha & Kim, 2020). She was part of a large religious group and frequently traveled back and forth from Daegu to Seoul. She attended worship services consisting of over 1,000 people. “Patient 31” was the beginning of great fear within the country. The terrifying truth was that this one patient participated in a religious sect called “Shincheonji,” which means “new heaven and new earth” (Shincheonji USA, n.d., para. 3). This sect is a large group that worships in tightly packed spaces; “Patient 31” had spent hours upon hours worshipping in these tight spaces, spreading the virus to thousands of members. The South

Korean government raised its health alert to the highest level, searching for the 212,000 members whose names were on a list provided by the sect (Bloomberg, 2020).

With all the turmoil occurring in South Korea and the East Asian countries, I began to worry about how the virus would impact the United States. My sister, best friend, and I stayed updated on the news and reports from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. In comparison to China and South Korea, the United States was not implementing significant measures to prevent the virus from entering the country. I felt so angry, disappointed, and worst of all, worried. Tonya, Nathalie, and I started hearing about travel restrictions and became concerned about whether we would be able to return home. My initial plan was to stay in South Korea for a couple of months before finally flying back to the United States. Tonya and Nathalie decided to leave earlier and flew out in February to avoid any delays or possible border closures.

While I was still in South Korea, living with my aunt on Jeju Island, the situation became increasingly worse in the U.S. South Korea, however, was able to gain control over the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In fact, Jeju Island seemed to be one of the safest places in South Korea and, as a result, I decided to stay longer than planned. While my friends and family were living in fear back in the U.S., I was living the life on a tropical island with my aunt, her daughter, and her friends. I was not ready to leave Korea any time soon.

As the start date of graduate school drew nearer, reality crept in. I became a bit nervous about going back to the U.S. after being away for seven years. I was also concerned about being a student again after so many years of being out of school. On top of that, the COVID-19 cases back home were steadily increasing. I finally flew out of South Korea on July 19, 2020. It was a surreal feeling when I finally arrived at my parents' home in Hampton, Virginia. I had to self-quarantine for at least 15 days. Quarantining was not much of a problem for me, as I enjoyed my time at home with my mother and stepfather. Although I spent most of my time at home, I had no negative feelings about my situation at the time.

As I prepared for the first day of graduate school, it was still unclear whether classes would be face-to-face or virtual. I became friends with a classmate in the MSW program. We discussed our concerns about the decision-making process used by the schools in the States. It felt like we were standing on a ledge waiting for the final verdict. When the final decision was made, I was pretty disappointed, as was my classmate. We were both looking forward to having in-person classes. As time went on, professors and students realized how difficult virtual synchronous learning could be. There were many technical problems with the school website, virtual classrooms, internet connections, and personal device issues. The university's Blackboard virtual platform provided many limitations, forcing professors to other platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. It seemed that most people were on the same page when it came to opinions on virtual learning; it was generally unfavored. I, on the other hand, was indifferent by the end of the semester. I had learned to enjoy being at home appreciating the ease of attending classes and

studying in the comfort of my own home. Considering how the federal and state governments were addressing the spread of COVID-19, I felt safer at home.

Despite the pandemic, graduate social work students were still required to complete internship hours. Some of my classmates had previously been assigned to locations that were not yet open due to COVID-19. These students were late starting their internship hours. However, I was at a location that allowed its staff to work from home. Our schedules were split, meaning we alternated office days. The interns were situated in one room while our school social work supervisors were in their personal offices. The K-12 schools were operating virtually; therefore, we had meetings with parents and faculty virtually as well. Towards the end of the semester, public schools were proposing to resume face-to-face classes. We were also scheduled to return to the office full-time. Everyone, the supervisors and interns, came back on a Wednesday. On Thursday, the first day I returned to the office, one of the interns learned that he came in contact with someone who had COVID-19. He immediately left and was tested for COVID-19. Many others also left early to get tested while the remaining interns and supervisors finished the day. The supervisor of the department then announced that work would be done from home for the remainder of the year. This situation was very stressful for everyone. The interns were worried about how they were going to acquire the required number of internship hours. Everyone was also highly anxious about whether they had COVID-19 or not.

As the fall 2020 semester came to an end, bad news struck again. The 2021 spring semester was also going to be virtual. While most of my classmates and professors grimaced at the news, I continued to feel indifferent. It upset me that people were still not doing what was necessary to stay safe to prevent the spread of COVID-19. I felt frustrated, annoyed, angry, disappointed, and embarrassed at the state of COVID-19 intervention efforts by my country compared to other countries. I think the United States was once seen as the most powerful or favored country in the world. However, now, the U.S. government seemed to be failing to uphold its past reputation, looking weak in the eyes of other countries.

I am frustrated and annoyed by people who choose to be careless when in public places, putting the lives of those around them at risk. My anger comes from the slow response of the U.S. government to provide necessary assistance to its citizens. COVID-19 created a worldwide emergency that required a more aggressive and rapid response. In South Korea, the government used mass text alerts and phone applications to keep the citizens informed on the locations an infected person visited as well as the number of infected persons. They also used surveillance cameras to track the movement of the infected person. These are only a couple of examples from the many actions South Korea had taken to keep its people safe and informed.

During the winter break, more and more people were becoming infected with the seasonal flu virus and colds. Being infected by the flu virus or a cold along with COVID-19 may cause higher risks of developing more severe symptoms (Sharp Health Care, 2020). The rise in the number of sick individuals was causing me some anxiety because I was worried about my

friends and family. I was happy that the 2021 spring semester would be held virtually. Just knowing that I did not have to place myself in a potentially unsafe environment or situation or risk exposure to my family and friends reduced my anxiety.

People are experiencing and displaying a variety of emotions; many of these emotions are warranted due to the current living conditions. People are afraid and finding it difficult to change their lifestyles so abruptly. However, the only way to see any progress is by working together and taking all necessary precautions. We must also put more pressure on the government to provide more assistance for its citizens. Only then will we see any change in our current situation.

### **“I Didn’t Expect This to Happen to Me” ... Kayla’s Story**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had its influence on this country and has impacted the way individuals live their lives. In March of 2020, I was sent home during the senior year of my undergraduate studies due to this pandemic. I did not know what to think at first, but as classes switched to being virtual, I learned how to adapt. The virtual classes became a challenge to the school and some students. This new way of learning and teaching created some technology challenges and required rapid adaptation on everyone’s part. The new way of learning and thinking came down to being adaptable for the year of 2020.

When I first heard that I was accepted at Norfolk State University for my master’s, I was so excited because I would be able to attend a school that was close to home and follow my passion in social work. I knew that it would be a great experience because I had heard positive comments about the master of social work program and its various professors. Although I was excited to attend this university, I still had fears about what the upcoming semester would look like due to the pandemic. All I knew in the current moment was that I was trying to make it through undergraduate school and receive my bachelor’s degree. At that point, I began to think less about what starting my master’s program would entail.

Fast forward a few months. I had been questioning what to expect for my first semester of graduate school. I had already experienced virtual classes, but I had no idea what the upcoming semester would involve. I watched all the surrounding colleges and universities announce they were going to have virtual learning; however, I had heard nothing from my new school. The not knowing caused some anxiety because I am a planner. It was not until a week or two before the start of classes that I learned I would be participating in remote synchronous courses except for having to attend my field placement in person. I was relieved to hear the news because I did not want to risk my health attending a school where thousands of other students would be during the peak of the pandemic. I was also overwhelmed and irritated because I felt like I should have known what instruction was going to look like at least a month prior to the start of classes.



Being a graduate student and trying to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic was not as challenging as I expected it to be. Having the previous experience of switching quickly to virtual learning during undergraduate school allowed me to prepare for what was to come as a graduate student. The transition for me was smooth; however, being virtual requires you to be a diligent student and keep track of your assignments. When you are attending in-person courses, it is imperative to prepare for classes. As an in-person student, you must get out of bed and leave your room to attend class. With virtual courses, you have to motivate yourself to get out of bed, log in to the computer, and complete your coursework in a timely manner.

A challenge that most people, including myself, have faced is ensuring those with whom you share a home understand that when you are attending classes, you need to focus and should not be distracted. Sometimes you have traditions you do with your family such as eating together at a certain time; however, those have to be broken at times when you have a late-night class. Ensuring your family understands is essential. There are times where you must tell your friends and family no: No, you cannot do something that they want you to do, because you have to focus on your coursework.

Adjusting to the accommodations that come with family and coursework did come up during my time of virtual instruction. I typically have a routine when I am home such as when I eat dinner with my parents; however, that changed once I participated in virtual instruction. When I was away at school during my undergraduate years, I did not have this issue, because I had a different routine than I do now. Being home during my graduate years has been an adjustment because I cannot just walk into my professor's office to see if they are available to talk or provide assistance as I would if I was in-person. Professors are available virtually; however, this is not the same as it would be if I was physically present in their office.

I believe having in-person interactions with professors and colleagues is essential because it helps build strong relationships, increases classroom engagement, and facilitates effective communication. As a result of the virtual instruction, I was never able to physically meet my peers, classmates, or professors. The only time I would see and interact with them was behind a screen during class, through email, or in our occasional group chats. Due to this recent experience, I now know what to expect for next semester. I have learned that participating in study groups via Zoom or connecting with colleagues through group chats will help me get through my second semester of my MSW because it enhances my understanding of various assignments or topics.

Living during the COVID-19 pandemic as a graduate student has been both simple and challenging. I was always on top of my assignments. I typically submitted them well in advance to not overwhelm myself with the number of assignments I had. I showed up to my field practicum and completed the required hours I needed with no problems. I started to enjoy virtual instruction and did not mind participating in class discussions. Often, I would hear my colleagues complaining about virtual instruction and how they wished it was in-person;

however, I was content with the way instruction would be delivered. I found waking up, getting out of bed, getting ready, and logging in for class came naturally to me. I will admit participating in an online course that was three hours long was quite challenging because staring at a screen that long was tiring. However, on the bright side, I did not have to deal with some of the technological challenges that my colleagues experienced.

I enjoyed attending courses online; however, I got comfortable at home, which some days made it difficult to leave the house to participate in my field practicum. It seemed like my first semester as a virtual graduate student was going great until I got closer to the end of the semester. There were two weeks of instruction left when I tested positive for COVID-19. Testing positive was one of the most challenging experiences I ever encountered. Trying to finish out the semester strong while being very fatigued with massive headaches was a challenge that I knew I had to push through to overcome and make it through the semester.

Who would have thought I would have been diagnosed with this virus towards the end of the semester? I remember sitting there crying when I found out that I tested positive because I have a high-risk parent, and I knew I had so much work that was about to be due. My instructors were very understanding when I told them I had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Some of them offered me extensions on my assignments or the opportunity to forgo presentations, while others did not offer any accommodations. I was, however, grateful that my instructors were understanding that I would need to take some breaks during class because I felt very tired as a result of COVID-19. I struggled those last two weeks with being motivated to complete my assignments. Every time I tried to work on a paper, I suffered from a terrible headache that caused me to have to stop and come back later. Eventually, I was able to complete all of my assignments and finish out my first semester as a graduate student. Although I tested positive for COVID-19, I believe the virtual instruction period went well, and I cannot wait to see what future courses will look like. I discovered that the key to a successful virtual experience during this pandemic is time management and organization.

My first semester in the MSW program at Norfolk State University has allowed me to learn a number of different skills that I will be able to utilize next semester. Time management was essential to being successful because it allowed me to not fall behind even when I was dealing with COVID-19 firsthand. I learned that I am capable of succeeding in the midst of a pandemic if I continue to use time management, have a positive attitude, know that I'm not alone in feeling overwhelmed some days, and plan ahead with my assignments. This is important for anyone who is participating in virtual instruction.

### **“Altered Expectations” ... Briana’s Story**

I dreamed about my senior year of undergrad for many years and could not wait to be a second-semester senior. The second semester was off to a quick start, and I thought I was ready to graduate. I was counting down the days to senior send-off, cap and gown distribution, finals

week, and finally... commencement. As February approached, I started to realize just how close I was to finishing and having a degree. I was taking it all in, but I was ready to graduate.

Shortly before my last spring break of undergrad, my university began sending email after email providing updates on "COVID-19" in China. It seemed like nothing to worry about. After all, it was in China only. I questioned why they sent so many informational emails about a virus I had never heard about. I usually skimmed over the email and then deleted it without any worry or afterthoughts. A few weeks after the emails started, I packed my car and drove eight hours home, just like I did for any other semester break. However, little did I know, I had attended my last in-person class and the last day of my internship within that same week.

During spring break, I saw COVID-19 all over the news and social media. The United States had its first case, and the outbreak quickly spread like wildfire. On March 11, I went to breakfast with some of my friends like we normally did when we were home for breaks. We talked, laughed, and caught up with each other for a while. Our conversation seemed to hover over COVID-19 and all of the "what ifs." One of my friends received a text saying that a few universities in Pennsylvania had extended spring break by a week. We were hopeful that our universities would do the same and were excited about a longer break. Before we left, I remember my friend saying, "This is only going to get worse." I was skeptical of the severity at that time. I texted my former volleyball coach to see if she knew anything about my university. She said she had not heard anything yet but would keep me updated. The next day, I received a text from my coach telling me that I should stay home because classes would be virtual until April.

Shortly after, I received an email stating that spring break was extended by a week and that we would resume with virtual classes until April 5th. I felt distraught and had many mixed emotions. Despite all that I felt, I decided to drive back to school for the "virtual" part of my semester. However, the month or so of virtual learning turned into the rest of my final semester. Every day we received updates about what the rest of the semester would look like. My professors scrambled to make emergency learning plans for the remainder of the semester. It was extremely unorganized and pure chaos. Most of my professors chose to complete the semester asynchronously. They pushed out what felt like busy work and hardly communicated with the class. I did not feel like I was learning at all.

As this dreadful and unexpected semester continued, I remained hopeful that I would get through it, and used commencement as the light at the end of the tunnel. Unfortunately, my in-person commencement was postponed and held virtually. After four long years, I watched my name scroll across the TV screen in my living room without my classmates, professors, or mentors there to celebrate our accomplishments together. Despite the chaotic ending of my undergrad, I found peace in knowing I would start my master's degree in person the next fall.

The summer leading up to my first semester of graduate school was busy with preparing for higher education and navigating my way through a new university. I felt much uncertainty because I did not have a plan and knew things could change so quickly. I received email after email, again, with updates on the fall semester. In late July, we received an email stating that our first two weeks would be virtual, but in-person classes would begin after that. However, two weeks of synchronous online lectures turned into the entire semester.

Day after day, I logged onto Blackboard and prepared myself for six hours of lecture. I sat at my laptop at my dining room table and attempted to take in as much as I could in such a setting. At first, the lectures felt longer and lonelier each class. I did not know any of my professors and had never met any of my new classmates. However, my professors knew the stress virtual learning placed on each of us. Most of them started class by doing a check-in with each student. During the check-ins, we shared stressors, worries, and positive notes with one another. The check-ins reminded me I was not alone in this experience and also helped me to bond with my classmates. It was hard to build a support group during a virtual setting but, as the semester progressed, I found myself emailing my professors for guidance or texting my classmates for extra help.

From emergency remote learning plans and a canceled graduation ceremony to long online lectures at a new university, the fall 2020 semester was an unforgettable experience. The semester felt never-ending. I never expected to feel as accomplished as I did, or to feel like I learned as much as I did. However, I embraced my virtual classroom and internship, and I decided to focus on the positive side. I took in as much as I could and had a much better experience than I imagined. Although COVID-19 altered learning for so many, I was glad to be safe and healthy. I look forward to returning to a classroom setting one day; I would not say I prefer virtual lectures. Despite my preference for face-to-face instruction, this fall semester had prepared me for another virtual semester. I have learned what works best for me and how to get the most out of a virtual classroom. I quickly learned there were a lot of distractions at home. I limited my distractions by attending lectures in our home office and sitting at a desk. This helped make home feel more like the classroom. I used my laptop to access lectures and be present in class while I used my iPad to take notes and look at different assignments. I also made sure to make the most of my breaks between classes by getting up from my desk and stepping away from my work. While this was my experience, it's important to recognize that this was most definitely not the case for everyone, and this comes from a place of privilege. I was ready to tackle the spring semester, one online lecture at a time.

### **Conclusion**

The lived experiences of Angela, Kayla, and Briana presented similar concerns and experiences in how they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, all three students had similar expectations of graduate education. As they became aware of the instructional platform, all were disappointed with the virtual format for their first semester of graduate instruction. As time progressed, each student was able to exercise control over their current challenges by adapting to

the circumstances of COVID-19, taking in new information, asking for assistance, and developing a plan to succeed. This internal locus of control mediated their challenges and resulted in their ability to be resilient. The experiences of these students suggest an opportunity for future research to delineate the specific strategies, coping mechanisms, supports, and resources that allow some students to mount an effective proactive response to stressors associated with matters beyond their control.

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