

## **An Interprofessional Response to COVID-19 in a CSD Graduate Program: A Blessing in Disguise?**

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### **Abstract**

*This research highlights one private midwestern university's response to COVID-19. The author collaborated with university recreational directors and the campus ministry program in planning and implementing a mentoring program focused on first-year graduate students enrolled in a communication sciences and disorders program. By its nature of being a health science, it carries a high level of rigor. Additionally, the graduate program is highly competitive. The mixed-methods study describes the mentoring program and how it was implemented. As such quantitative and qualitative data are shared to show how communication sciences and disorders graduate students' first-year experiences have been shaped by participation in an interprofessional mentoring program. T-test scores showed extremely significant changes in students' perceptions of their own resilience from the beginning to the conclusion of the semester-long mentoring program. Qualitative data obtained from student interviews substantiate the quantitative data. Discussion of results, study limitations, as well as implications for practice are included.*

**Keywords:** mentoring, graduate education, communication sciences and disorders, resilience, interprofessional education, COVID

### **Introduction**

Beginning August 2020, a cohort of graduate students commenced their first year of graduate study in the rigorous program of Communication Sciences and Disorders, also known as Speech-Language and Hearing Sciences in a private, four-year midwestern university. Many of these students moved far from home to matriculate. However, the stress of moving away from home and diving into graduate school pales in comparison to the fact that these students began their graduate education amid a global pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, the research participants will have been out of the “brick and mortar” classroom for many months, having utilized online instructional methods including synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning models. They were asked to establish a “new normal” in the final semester of their undergraduate careers only to be asked to establish yet another “new normal” by starting the next phase of their educational careers, again amidst COVID-19.

This study aimed to determine how millennials in a rigorous plan of graduate study have coped with COVID-19. Specifically, how have graduate students' first-year experiences been shaped by participation in an interprofessional mentoring program that includes elements shown in the research to be effective in building and sustaining resilience? Additionally, is there any relationship between graduate students' resilience and their emotional intelligence? These research questions are investigated quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

### **Literature Review**

The literature reviewed is replete with papers and reports written from a systemic perspective, looking at how the pandemic has impacted larger university systems and their responses to the issue. As such, effects at the

university-level will be shared. While not as abundant, this author will also share what the research reveals about the impact on students, including what the literature has provided in terms of tips for students amid the pandemic.

### ***Systemic Perspective of COVID-19***

According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2021), as of April 19, 2021, the number of diagnosed cases of COVID-19 in the United States was 31,444,706 and the number of deaths was 563,980. From February 2020, continuing throughout the following months, the United States saw changing, startling statistics which served as a catalyst for universities to act quickly.

Brown (2020) reported that when it became clear that COVID-19 was spreading rapidly on a global scale, governments suddenly took action and began shutting down businesses, schools, and universities. Within a few weeks, about 20,000 higher education institutions had ceased normal operation and sent 200 million students home, with many switching to online instruction after only a few days of preparation. This falls in line with a survey sent to university presidents in which Lederman (2020) reported the most taken actions that presidents said they had completed by mid-April included steps most colleges took immediately: moving to remote instruction for students, remote work for employees, and closing administrative offices. Other actions included moving admissions processes and campus tours online in preparation for the Fall 2020 semester. Additionally, it is acknowledged that while addressing these immediate concerns, it is also imperative to look ahead from the macro- and micro-level to design the new normal of campus regarding contingency planning for physical assets, risk management, development activities, and online instruction (Brown, 2020; Cowen, 2020; Quiett Smith, 2020). The issues previously mentioned require “top-down” planning. Cowen (2020) refers to this as taking a balcony view. This requires higher education administration to think beyond the crisis. “It’s all about gaining perspective and taking the long view” (Cowen, 2020, para. 11). He continues by recommending that administrators in higher education ask questions such as where do we want to be, and how can we come out stronger when this is all behind us?

Other authors such as Hogan and Ramamurthy (2020) feel that the crisis caused by the coronavirus should be used to transform graduate education to address long-standing issues such as equity, equality, and access. University administrations should seize opportunities now to move toward greater equity. Failure to do so will amplify inequality even further. Choosing the path of equity will require making university governance more accessible to all. If this fails to happen, Hogan and Ramamurthy (2020) believe that graduate education will survive but only at the expense of graduate students. The equity (or lack thereof) about which these authors speak can be felt to possibly an even greater degree in colleges and universities that serve historically minority populations. According to Quiett Smith (2020), most historically Black colleges and universities do not exist in resource-rich environments. As such, this negatively impacts their ability to build resilient systems that are capable of responding innovatively to a crisis such as COVID-19.

### ***Effects of the Pandemic***

This section discusses those effects that have been documented in the literature as a result of COVID-19. One of the major impacts of the pandemic has been on the way information is presented to students. Pedagogically speaking, “academe was--and still is--in a time of ‘pedagogical triage,’ as Bessette et al. (2020) wrote in March in an analysis of higher education’s shift to remote teaching. But triage was never the mission or purpose of online teaching. It needs to be more than that” (para. 8).

The shift to remote learning has impacted both students as well as those instructors and professors who have quickly made drastic changes in the delivery of information. For example, this author switched one course to a completely project-based learning environment once stay-at-home measures were put in place. Changes in the way that curriculum is taught including adjusting assignments, expectations, and grading. Bessette et al. (2020) hold that this is simply good teaching, though. Not all students have access to technology or high-speed Wi-Fi or may have limited access only. This provides professors the impetus for asking questions such as: “Is it possible for students to work from a phone?” “What learning activities can be changed to asynchronous schedules?” “Is video really necessary for this dialogue?” “How can I share course material without placing heavy demands on data download?”

Given the shift to remote learning, Fotuhi (2020) cautions against making assumptions that every student feels comfortable using technology as a sole means for learning or has technological literacy for online learning. For example, some students may need time to learn and navigate a new platform that is now their main method for learning content delivery. Some may prefer learning on paper, which allows for processing time and the ability to physically “touch” the material (e.g., taking notes, writing cue cards, skipping back to previous sections). As mentioned earlier, unanticipated difficulties with basic requirements for online learning, like a stable Internet connection or a computer capable of streaming lectures can pose additional problems for students. Fotuhi (2020) adds, “We can’t avoid using these new and emerging technological solutions if we want to continue teaching. But we need to be attuned to students’ difficulties, so we can speak to their anxieties” (para. 5).

COVID-19 has also affected student and employee mental health and student attrition. This is especially true for low-income and under-represented students. Even in the best of times, these students are most vulnerable to disruptions in their educational careers and threats to their personal well-being (Lederman, 2020). Brown and Kafka (2020) report that student mental health concerns in higher education were already skyrocketing prior to the pandemic. The crisis seems to have exacerbated students’ feelings of sadness, isolation, and anxiety (Global Resilience Institute, 2020). In a survey of over two thousand university students conducted by Active Minds (2020), 80 percent of those students surveyed reported that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health. The ways that their mental health has been impacted include stress/anxiety, disappointment/sadness, loneliness/isolation, and relocation.

Adding to students’ stress is the financial impact of COVID-19. Because of businesses closing, working college students are experiencing financial setbacks. They must file for unemployment to help support themselves. Some students have yet to see any funds as the system is overloaded (Abney & Hill, 2020; Rushe, 2020). After all, they are competing with more than 36 million people who, in March and April, 2020, have filed for unemployment due to job loss during the pandemic as reported by Cohen and Hsu (2020).

This section has discussed negative impacts of COVID-19 as it relates to higher education not as much from a systemic frame of reference but from a more localized perspective. It is clear from the literature that the effects of the coronavirus have impacted both instructors and students in several ways. The next section will discuss what authors have published in terms of how university systems and students can and are responding to the pandemic.

### ***Responding to COVID-19***

In terms of responding to COVID-19, Cowen (2020) states that institutions of higher education will not be able to return to the status quo--nor should they. To prepare for the future, Brown (2020) indicates that colleges and universities need to prepare themselves for the substantial changes that will be made. These changes will impact the way higher education institutions operate currently and in the future.

Depending on the size and location of the institution, survival and recovery must be considered (Cowen, 2020; Nadworny, 2020). Cowen (2020) adds that rebuilding for the future with the intention of making institutions more resilient requires leaders in academia to see exactly what is going on and discover patterns and opportunities for improvement and innovation. It is imperative that leaders in institutions of higher learning work with stakeholders to utilize federal and state funds wisely to improve and innovate during a time of rebuilding and restructuring.

In a survey of 187 two- and four-year college presidents conducted by Inside Higher Ed, the changes referenced in the aforementioned paragraphs are representative of long-term goals. The survey results showed the short-term, immediate focus to be on employees’ and the most vulnerable students’ mental and physical health, student attrition, and unbudgeted financial costs (Lederman, 2020). Lederman (2020) notes that the mental health of students remains colleges’ and universities’ very top concern currently. Forty-seven percent of presidents surveyed in April 2020, said they are “very concerned” about student mental health.

Luthra and Mackenzie (2020) suggest that given the instability of the current global environment, students need resilience and adaptability. These skills are necessary to navigate effectively through the pandemic. Looking to the future, some of the most important skills that employers will be looking for will be those that come out of a state of resilience and adaptability: creativity, communication and collaboration, empathy, emotional intelligence, and being able to work effectively as part of a team.

Many universities have posted helpful tips for students on their websites in the wake of the pandemic. Northeastern University, for example, established a Global Resilience Institute in response to COVID-19. The institute offers specific ways that students can manage their emotional and physical well-being. Students are encouraged to share their feelings with trusted family members or friends and ask for help if they want support (Global Resilience Institute, 2020). The University of Michigan (2020) is another university that has offered ways to support students during the pandemic. Like the Global Resilience Institute (2020), they suggest that students find their new normal. They want their students to recognize that without their usual routines, they may miss the structure. Students are urged to take time to find resources and create productive routines such as creating schedules, making checklists of things to be done just for today, as well as creating a productive workspace. Universities such as the University of Oregon (2020), University of California-Los Angeles (2020), and Columbia University (2020), to name a few, have developed extensive website space to address the coronavirus--targeted towards students, faculty, parents, and the community.

To manage physical wellness, the Global Resilience Institute (2020) also recommends that students think about the things they do to take care of themselves every day and attempt to continue those activities. Try to get at least six to eight hours of sleep and maintain a healthy diet. Students are urged to take a virtual exercise or yoga class and engage in activities outside that allow for physical distancing (e.g., hiking or running). Walks with family or friends while practicing physical distancing are deemed beneficial as are meditation and mindfulness activities.

Universities have also extended commitment deadlines for students to address the financial burden that graduate education can often create. They have deferred start dates for summer and fall semesters because of students' and parents' uneasiness about returning to the classroom too soon. With the unprecedented levels of uncertainty, disruptions, and stress students are facing as they try to make sense of new and constant demands and requirements, educators are in a unique position to support students. Therefore, they need to understand the potential obstacles that might get in the way of their learning (Fotuhi, 2020).

This literature review has looked at how colleges and universities have addressed COVID-19 up to this point. The author used a top-down framework, first looking at the large-scale impact of the pandemic (i.e., university-level). This was followed by direct impacts that faculty and students are currently addressing. Finally, methods of tackling the pandemic were shared. The literature reviewed discusses actions that target primarily undergraduate students. However, students who are engaging in post-baccalaureate study are not exempt from stressors and the effects of the pandemic. This literature review adds support for posing the research questions for this study.

## ***Methods***

### **Subject Recruitment**

The primary investigator utilized convenience sampling to recruit first-year graduate students from a private midwestern university's Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) program as subjects for the study. None of the students in the first-year cohort were directly instructed in any graduate-level academic or clinical courses taught by this researcher. Other faculty in the CSD department had no knowledge of who was and who was not participating in the study.

After receiving IRB approval, a recruitment statement in the form of an email was sent to the cohort of students via their respective university email addresses inviting them to participate. In the email, the primary investigator explained the purpose of the study, the subjects' role in the study, benefits, risks, and how data would be collected and used in the research. The primary investigator informed students that participation was voluntary and that no repercussions/retaliation/penalties would occur from the author (e.g., letters of recommendation) or via the department (e.g., nomination/receipt of Departmental honors) as a result of opting not to participate. To address possible feelings of coercion and minimize undue influence, the primary investigator emailed all first-year graduate students the consent documentation and a link to the assessment measures used in the study for subjects to complete. This was done so that students could read the email independently rather than feeling pressured in a group setting to make a decision to participate. The email clarified details of the study procedures. Included in the consent form, subjects were informed that they may drop out of the study at any time without any repercussions or retaliation. In addition, the consent form included the option for volunteering to be interviewed one-on-one after the study concluded. This intervention program (curriculum) is an originally designed program developed by the author for the purposes of this investigation.

## Research Participants

Of the 40-member cohort, six students volunteered to participate in the study. It should be noted that the program typically is a summer-start program. However, due to the pandemic and its restrictions, the start date was moved to the fall semester. In the pilot study conducted the previous academic year, students had already worked together as a cohort forming friendships for eight weeks during the summer semester before the study began. This group of students did not have that opportunity. In addition, the fall semester ended after Thanksgiving per university guidelines, which is approximately two weeks earlier than a typical fall semester. It is unknown whether a shift in the start and end dates for the fall semester had any bearing on the number of participants.

In terms of demographics, one out of the six participants was male, with the remaining five individuals identifying as female. The group, though small in number, was diverse in ethnicity. Fifty percent of the group was Caucasian with the remaining fifty percent being either Hispanic-American, Asian-American, or American Indian, respectively. Only one participant was a first-generation college student. All participants indicated that they were currently single. All participants were considered “tradition” student in that they began graduate school immediately after completing their baccalaureate degree.

## Mentoring Curriculum Implementation

The curriculum is centered on three facets to help build or maintain resilience: 1) physical/mental/emotional wellness; 2) mindfulness and gratitude; and 3) spiritual wellness. Given that the university is a private, faith-based university, the emphasis on spiritual wellness was in line with the university’s mission statement. The project was funded by a university-level grant. As such, the time frame for implementation was one semester. The program was originally piloted in the previous academic year as a year-long program. In the pilot, students who wished to participate met monthly beginning in September 2019 and completed their final mentoring session in May 2020. For this study, rather than monthly mentoring meetings, students met two times per month beginning September 2020 and ending November 2020 per guidelines of the grant. The fall 2020 semester was compressed into 14 weeks of study rather than the typical 16 weeks of study to allow students a longer winter break during the pandemic. Academic and clinical coursework were completed using a hybrid model of instruction.

The students met in person for group mentoring sessions each time in a room that allowed for social distancing, and they were required to wear masks per university COVID guidelines. Another aspect of the mentoring sessions involved sharing a meal with each other. All meals were catered and packaged as individual meals for each participant to abide by COVID restrictions. Once the meal was finished, participants were required to replace their masks. Research participants decided when they wished to meet for mentoring meetings to allow for consistent participation. Half of the meetings occurred during the students’ lunch break on Fridays. The other half occurred during the later afternoon before their final evening class on Mondays. All sessions were recorded and available for one week so that if any students had to miss a session, they could watch it before the next meeting. After a week, recordings were deleted. Any handouts that accompanied presentations were provided to students ahead of time. There was one hundred percent in-person attendance for four out of six sessions. One hundred percent of participants who were absent reported that they viewed the recorded sessions.

After the meal, a university faculty member presented a 45-minute interactive session that was aligned to the curriculum. This author worked collaboratively with three university faculty to plan and implement the curriculum. The first session was led by the primary investigator and incorporated information from Bryant and Veroff’s (2017) *Savoring*. The focus was on the different types of savoring one can possess such as marveling or even savoring stress after it is over. Students shared when they had experienced the various types of savoring. The second session was presented by an assistant director from the campus student recreation center. The theme of the second session was setting priorities and maintaining work-life balance. The students completed an exercise requiring them to list their ten top values/life priorities. They ranked value/life priorities from most important to least important. They were then asked to remove values #2, #5, and #10. Then, they were asked to remove two more values. These two values were allowed to be two of the least important. Later, the students were able to reorganize and put two new values back. The realization of the exercise was that after the reorganization, no one had school-related values on their list. Students reported that this exercise taught them to “look at the bigger picture” of life.

The third session was led by a campus minister. The discussion centered on spirituality and meaning making. This was highly interactive with the campus minister asking students to share about what might be perceived as sensitive topics such as “How’s your soul?”, “How do we bring speech to the pain we are feeling right now?” and encouraging students to “not lie about how you are doing” and “it’s okay to not be okay right now.” Common words used in response to questions were “coping”, “adjusting”, and “grieving”.

The second half of the mentoring sessions began with the director of the campus student recreation center presenting on self-advocacy and advocacy for marginalized or under-represented people. It was varied in focus and included informing students about knowing one’s “why” and engaging them in an exercise in conflict management. Knowing one’s “why” helps them to stay focused on goals, think about their identities, and equip them to ask questions of others. Following the fourth session, the primary investigator presented on gratitude, adapted from Bryant and Veroff (2017) and Smookler (2018). Different exercises for showing gratitude were provided and students gave feedback about the ones they felt would be most beneficial to them. The same campus minister who presented the first session on spiritual wellness also presented a second time on this topic. He presented on how to spiritually deal with stressors in our lives. Given that his presentation was near the presidential election, this particular session was timely.

At the end of each of the six mentoring sessions, participants were asked to write down what they planned to do with the information they had learned that day on a notecard. Participants did not share what they had written and this was intentional. They were asked to keep the note in a prominent place throughout the coming days to remind themselves of their plan. During the week, the primary investigator would email students individually with the same follow-up question: How is your plan going? This was done to increase accountability as well as to encourage students to be reflective.

### ***Quantitative Data Collection***

Before the first mentoring session, students completed two anonymous online surveys. Data were coded to ensure that comparative analysis could be made between assessments. One survey was the *Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale* (2003). This survey comprises 25 items requiring the individual to self-assess in terms of adaptability, locus of control, spiritual influences, tenacity, and tolerance of negative affect (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The second survey was a demographic survey developed by this author. Midway through the mentoring sessions, the participants also completed the *Quick Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment*. This instrument allows for participants to rate themselves on their ability to be aware of, understand and manage their emotions (Mohapel, 2012).

At the conclusion of the mentoring program, the participants completed the *Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale* (2003) again in November before leaving for winter break. The primary investigator utilized statistical analysis of the pre-and post-test data to compare results. Data from those results are shared in a later section.

### ***Qualitative Data Collection***

Qualitative data were collected during 30-minute individual semi-structured interviews conducted with participants. All six participants agreed to be interviewed. Interviews took place between the last mentoring session in early November 2020 and the start of winter recess, which was November 24, 2020. The author’s research assistant (funded by the grant) participated in all mentoring meetings and interviews, taking notes. She also manually transcribed all student interviews on the same day as the interview was conducted to ensure accuracy of data collected. All interviews utilized a video conferencing platform. The author also transcribed the interviews and compared them to the research assistant’s transcriptions to ensure reliability and accuracy of data transcription. All participants were asked the same questions on the interview protocol. However, if the primary investigator wished to probe further, additional questions were asked. Interview questions are found in Appendix A.

### ***Results***

The results from the *Connor Davidson Resilience Scale* (2003) pre-test and post-test indicate that participation in six mentoring sessions over the course of three months resulted in improved resilience as perceived by participants. The two-tailed  $p$  value equals 0.0003. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be statistically significant. Group data are represented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Paired t-test Results of the Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (2003)*

	N	Mean	SD	SE
Pre-test	6	68	14.56	5.94
Post-test	6	95.17	9.13	3.73

\*p &lt; .001, significant

*The Quick Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment* (Mohapel, 2012) separates the emotional intelligence quotients into four specific areas: 1) emotional awareness; 2) emotional management; 3) social-emotional awareness; and 4) relationship management. When scoring this particular measure, the four areas are scored independently ranging from 0 to 40, with the higher numbers indicating stronger ratings/perceptions. Any score between 0 and 24 denotes an area for enrichment and would require attention to develop. Scores ranging from 25 to 34 indicate effective functioning, but there still may be opportunities to strengthen these areas of a person desired. Finally, a score that falls between 35 and 50 is indicative of enhanced skills in terms of emotional intelligence. Individuals scoring in this range would be encouraged to leverage these strengths to develop weaker skills. Table 2 represents the raw scores of each participant in the four areas. Only three scores fell in the lower area (needing enrichment). On the other hand, eight percent of the scores fell in the enhanced skills area with the remaining 79% of the scores falling in the effective functioning area. The scores were in different sections

**Table 2***Raw Score Data on the Quick Emotional Intelligence Scale (Mohapel, 2012)*

Research Subject	Emotional Awareness	Emotional Management	Social-Emotional Awareness	Relationship Management
Subject 1	25	22	25	18
Subject 2	25	28	34	32
Subject 3	29	23	35	34
Subject 4	26	27	37	35
Subject 5	24	25	30	28
Subject 6	25	29	31	26

within the same subject. Although technically a positive correlation (the value of  $R$  is 0.27), relationship between perceived resilience and perceived emotional intelligence is weak,  $r(48) = .27, p = .609$ . Given the small sample size for the study, this may be the reason for the weak correlation between emotional intelligence and resilience. The author recognizes that this is a limitation of the study, which will be discussed further in a later section.

### Qualitative Data Analysis

The primary investigator used conventional content analysis to study the collected data. Content analysis is grounded in cognitive psychology. That is, the research interprets the content of textual data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifies themes, or patterns, to arrive at more latent, abstract meanings of the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Pinker, 2007; Schreier, 2012). Pinker (2007) describes the foundation for the content analysis used for qualitative research thusly, "Semantics [meaning] is about the relation of words to reality--the way that speakers commit themselves to a shared understanding of the truth, and the way their thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world" (p. 3).

The primary investigator began by reading each individual transcript multiple times in order to familiarize herself with the data. Manual color coding was used to identify patterns in words and phrases used by the interviewees. The author then began categorizing patterns, using terms such as "social interaction," "time management," and

“being flexible”. Once the data were sorted into meaningful categories, the primary investigator made inferences about the messages contained within the data, given her knowledge of the study participants and their current situations. This allowed for the primary investigator to arrive at more abstract conclusions about the data.

### ***Qualitative Findings***

Three broad categories emerged from students’ answers to the interview questions. These categories include self-learning, challenges, and blessings in disguise. Within each category a number of themes emerged. Each category will be discussed with its themes. Finally, the author will share commonalities between the three sets of responses.

#### ***Self-Learning***

Self-learning is the first category identified in the qualitative data analysis. The most prominent theme identified in this category was productive strategies. In fact, it was further divided into sub-themes which are explained.

#### ***Productive Strategies***

The theme of productive strategies included responses centered on tools and/or strategies that students realized that they needed to implement to progress through the semester. Sub-themes falling under productive strategies include time management, adaptability, locus of control, physical fitness/wellness, and relying on previous experience. These themes are supported in adult learning theory and advance the notion of being a self-directed learner (Merriam, 2002).

**Time management.** Students spoke about time management and adaptability as the strategies they used most frequently. What makes the items strategies rather than merely skills is the fact that students made the choice *on their own* to develop systems for time management. They did not have to be reminded to use them--they knew to implement a to-do list or daily calendar to organize their day. This topic often came up in the weekly emails when students would discuss how their plans were going.

**Adaptability.** Likewise, students also exhibited self-awareness that they needed to be flexible during a period of uncertainty. Observations during interactions with students support this finding. Students seemed to have entered the semester with quite a bit of flexibility. The characteristic of adaptability, or flexibility, was evidenced in statements such as “I learned that I am pretty good at rolling with the flow and adapting” and “I learned that I thrive on structure; but I am quick to adapt to changes as they come along.”

**Locus of control.** When asked what they believed helped them with their flexibility, a related category of responses emerged: locus of control. Participants included such statements as “I have to think about what’s in my control [to change],” (discussed during one of the sessions with the campus minister) and “There are more important things out there; we can’t control everything.” These statements are indicative of resilient individuals in that they demonstrate an internal locus of control (Cazan & Dumitrescu, 2015; Kronborg et al., 2017). That is, the students do not feel like they are victims; they understand that the circumstances are unfortunate and challenging, but they realize that everyone is going through the same pandemic.

**Physical fitness/wellness.** Another category falling under the theme of productive strategies is physical fitness and wellness. Wellness, in this case, includes not only physical wellness, but also emotional and mental wellness. This category emerged in response to the question of whether there were any blessings in disguise more so than what participants had learned about themselves. This topic will be discussed more in depth in a later section. However, students did mention that they used activities such as walking or jogging as a way to stay fit and simply get outside during the pandemic. Other participants discussed the toll that the pandemic had taken on their mental and emotional health. However, they stated that they developed ways to cope such as texting a friend or making sure they did not spend too much time alone. Indicators of the emotional toll of isolation were exemplified in statements such as “I took it for granted that my friends are always around,” “I learned that I really rely on social interaction with others,” and “I can’t tell you how much I’d give to be in a 7:30 [p.m.] class with Dr. Jones [pseudonym] right now.”

**Previous experience.** The final category of responses that falls under the theme of productive strategies is relying on previous experience. While there were not as many responses referring to previous experience, the category bears mentioning. Students do find value in life experiences. For example, one student reminisced about dancing

lessons and competitions during her interview. She indicated that “if I was in a competition and I hadn’t done as well as I would’ve liked, my mom would always tell me, ‘This is one small aspect of your life.’ This semester and last semester are just one small aspect of my life.” When asked what she attributed to her flexibility, another participant responded, “My experiences through undergrad have helped me to roll with whatever happens.”

### **Feelings and Emotions**

The next theme that emerged from the answers to the question about self-learning is feelings and emotions. Participants talked about their feelings in a variety of ways. One student framed it in terms of learning to handle [feelings around] conflict within their family unit. Feelings also came in the form of surprise. Students were surprised at either how well or not they adapted to an online learning platform, particularly for clinical education. One student expressed the following: “I was surprised that I knew a lot more about [swallowing disorders] than I thought I’d know.”

On the other hand, surprise came in the form of realizing that one is not as good at a particular skill as they thought they were. For example, one student commented, “I thought I was more organized than I was.” Related to that, a student responded, “I have learned that I actually procrastinate more when I don’t have a full schedule. This caused me to feel a little stressed.” Given that all students in the study are millennials and grew up with technology, it was unusual to hear a student say, “I feel like I am not technologically gifted.” Feelings also came in the form of more pleasant surprises such as finding out that one enjoys working with adult populations more than pediatric and vice-versa. The experience also helped to affirm their enjoyment of working with certain areas of communication disorders and not others.

**Social interaction.** Social interaction is the final theme that arose from responses to the question about what students had learned about themselves. From the responses given, connection to others seems highly valued by participants. This theme overlaps, to an extent, with feelings and emotions experienced that students noted during interviews. There were no categories identified within this theme. Students were open and clear that they missed social interaction and connection to others during the pandemic, especially during the full lockdown period. For example, one student commented how helpful text message groups had been to stay in touch with others as well as with their clinical supervisors.

Another example of the self-directedness of the adult learner was revealed in the statement, “You have to take it upon yourself to reach out to others.” The themes identified under challenges will be discussed in the next section.

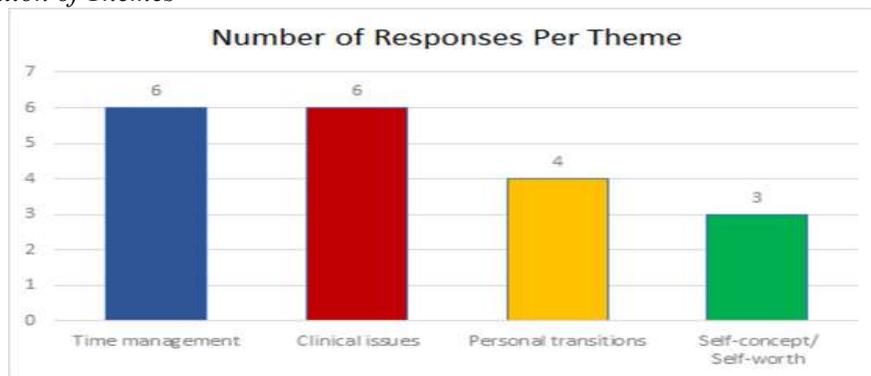
### **Challenges**

The themes falling under challenges include time management, clinical issues, personal transitions, and self-confidence/feelings of self-worth. With regard to frequency, time management and clinical issues were equally discussed in terms of challenges faced during the semester. Figure 1 represents how the themes were discussed by study participants in terms of frequency.

Time management is self-explanatory. Still being under COVID restrictions with regard to public gatherings blurs the line between work, school, and personal time. It is understandable that this theme would rise as predominant.

Clinical issues included working with actual clients in person as well as utilizing tele-therapy, which require two different skill sets; targeting new, unfamiliar communication disorders; working with a co-clinician on some cases, and adjusting to sometimes changing clinical schedules. It should be noted that students indicated that one of the things that made these adjustments challenging was the short amount of time to learn about implementation of tele-therapy as a new student clinician.

**Figure 1**  
*Frequency Distribution of Themes*



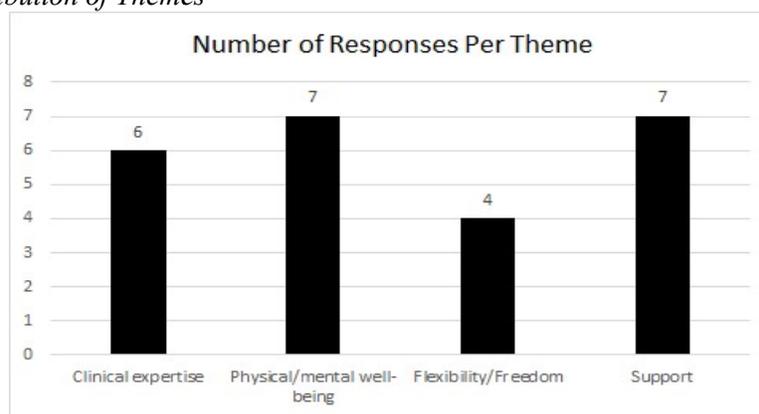
Personal transitions included the actual move from home to a new city. Also being away from their families weighed on some students. Items discussed under the theme of self-concept and self-worth dealt with how students felt both in the clinical setting as well as personally. For example, one student noted, “One challenge was just to feel confident, like I could share my opinions when we would de-brief [after a case].” Another participant stated, “It’s easy to be hard on myself. I’ve had to keep an open mindset. I’m here to learn, so I have to keep that mindset.” On a more personal level, one participant shared that anxiety and motivation were their challenges. These take over so much so that the participant indicated that they found themselves shutting down at times.

### **Blessings in Disguise**

The frame of reference for the question that refers to blessings in disguise originates from positive psychology. This area of psychology focuses on wellbeing and optimal functioning in individuals as well as learned optimism, gratitude, and authentic happiness (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Seligman, 2008). In their research that investigated trauma, resilience, and gratitude, Vieselmeyer et al. (2017) indicated that both resilience and gratitude are considered productive mechanisms. It is resilience that operates to prevent the negative outcomes of trauma, while gratitude may act as an adaptive mechanism in response to adverse symptoms following trauma.

The identified themes for this question include clinical expertise, physical/mental well-being, flexibility/freedom, and support. One participant indicated that at the time of the interview that they had not experienced any blessings in disguise yet. Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of themes that arose.

**Figure 2**  
*Frequency Distribution of Themes*



### **Clinical Expertise**

Interestingly, this theme arose when students were asked about challenges. The positive outcomes clinically that students discussed centered on more exposure to a variety of clients and types of communication disorders. They also felt that they benefited from working with a larger number of clinical supervisors as opposed to one clinical supervisor, which is what usually occurs during a semester.

### ***Physical/Mental Well-Being***

This theme had two categories of responses. One dealt with positive outcomes regarding physical wellness. The other category addressed mental well-being. Students stated that they had enjoyed getting outdoors and in doing so, became more active. Other participants simply noted that they felt healthier because they exercised more. In terms of mental well-being, one student discussed how they took time--actually *made* time (i.e., "I showed intentionality...") for "down-time". This was part of one of the presentations shared by the assistant director of the student recreation center that focused on prioritizing. Another participant shared that they "just took everything in" and this helped them mentally and emotionally. "Being able to take care of my mental health through the rough patches during the semester..." was also stated.

### ***Flexibility/Freedom***

An interesting juxtaposition to the challenge of time management came in the form of the theme of flexibility and freedom. That is, while students recognized the difficulty of managing their time as a first-semester graduate student and in a compressed semester, they were still appreciative of the freedom offered by a more open schedule. Some of their graduate courses were offered synchronously while others were asynchronous. The freedom came in the form of doing preferred activities such as yoga, reading fiction, and hiking rather than being tied to a specific schedule that may not have afforded these activities. However, it also came in the form of freedom *from* typical activities such as a daily commute to campus. Flexibility was inferred by such statements as, "I really like being able to do things on my own time," and "I've been taking advantage of crafting and some home improvement."

### ***Support***

As a theme, support held many facets. Students felt supported by their academic professors who made themselves available to discuss any course-related questions during the semester. They also noted that they appreciated getting to meet with their assigned academic advisor during the semester to check in with them. They felt that this was more than an advising meeting because their advisor discussed topics such as their professional passions and where they see themselves after graduation, etc. Students also noted how supported they felt by their clinical professors who would hold weekly Zoom meetings with them. Student-to-student support was also apparent in responses. One participant made the following statement: "I got a lot closer to the girl in my cohort this semester; we've helped each other out."

### ***Discussion***

This section will address some commonalities across identified themes. The author will discuss conclusions made from the data analysis, study limitations, as well as implications for practice in terms of higher education instruction and mentoring. Figure 3 shows how themes and categories overlapped.

It is not surprising that the most prevalent overlap occurs between the answers to questions about self-learning and blessings in disguise. By finding value in physical and/or mental well-being, and adaptability and flexibility, students are able to see these constructs as positive outcomes of their circumstances. Another way to look at these commonalities is realizing that students are addressing physic and mental health and becoming flexible or adaptable, utilizing these tools, or protective mechanisms, in the face of the pandemic, thus leading to resilience.

Another piece of evidence that students are showing resilience during the pandemic is the commonality of the theme of clinical issues/expertise between answers to questions about challenges and blessings in disguise. While students found challenge in learning to treat clients in novel ways, they still found value in the experience. The students viewed the clinical

#### **Figure 3**

*Comparison/Contrast of Identified Themes*



challenges as chances to learn and grow. This evidence shows a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007), which is present in resilient individuals.

The commonality of the theme of time management in relation to the questions about self-learning and challenges is also not surprising. The conclusion can be made that while managing one's time effectively could be viewed as a challenge, it is possible to overcome the challenge by developing new strategies (i.e., adaptive behaviors) for organization and time management. Alvarado, Spataru, and Woodbury (2017) as well as Armstrong, Galligan, and Critchley (2011) relate this skill set to emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence may also be directly related to resilience, each impacting the other. These authors note that students who possess high emotional intelligence evidence adaptive behaviors during stressful situations.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study have been seen in light of some limitations. The first limitation is the small sample size. Although the quantitative data show extremely significant effects, one must use caution in terms of generalizability with the collected data because of the small number of participants. However, to control for this limitation, the primary investigator opted to include qualitative data which corroborated the quantitative findings. Given that procedure, it is still recommended that if replicating the study, a larger sample size be used.

A second limitation of the study is the time constraint placed by the guidelines of the grant. The program had to be implemented in a semester. When piloted, the program was designed and implemented as a year-long (academic year) program to guide students through their entire first year of graduate study, including more sessions and information. This was purposeful to provide ongoing, embedded support and mentoring for students. Again, while results of the condensed program were positive, one has to question if the pre- and post-survey results and answers to interview questions would have changed given participation for an academic year rather than a single semester. Also, the findings of this study offer new, potentially useful information for this student population.

This author recognizes that another limitation of the study is that all data collected are self-reported. That is, the responses to the surveys are perceptual data based on the participants' thoughts, feelings, and physiology at a given moment. For the purposes of the follow up interviews, these self-reported data may contain several potential sources of bias that should be recognized and controlled for in future studies.

### **Implications for Practice**

After reading the results section, one might be inclined to say that higher education administration and faculty do not need to continue to address student resilience after the pandemic subsides as it appears that students already

have it, albeit given the small sample size in the research project. This author cautions against this overconfident thinking. In light of the research published up to this point, it will be important for institutions of higher education to maintain programs, processes, and procedures with adequate funding to ensure stability and sustainability for the long-term to address student resilience.

Instructors in higher education can also not assume that only undergraduate students need support. Graduate students also face mental illness, self-doubt, lack of confidence, isolation, and fear of failure which impact academic achievement. They, too, need effective strategies at the ready when they endure challenges, even if those challenges are not at a pandemic level. No single person or program has all of the expertise to address these issues, hence, the interprofessional model represented in this study.

Instructors need to be able to recognize students in duress so that they can maintain a more proactive approach rather than a reactive one when dealing with these types of student issues. When the pandemic is “over”, it is not *really* over. That is, students will feel the effects financially, emotionally, and academically for some months to come. Depending on one’s personal situation, some students will feel the effects more deeply than others. Only when higher education administration, instructors, and staff realize this will we be able to foster a *culture* of resilience in our colleges and universities.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Interview Questions

1. What are one or two highlights of the mentoring sessions you recall? What made them highlights for you?
2. Which kind of information shared during the mentoring sessions did you find most helpful-- physical/mental wellness, mindfulness/gratitude, or spiritual wellness? Why?
3. How will you use the information you have learned in the upcoming semesters of study?
4. What are three words you would use to describe the mentoring program experience?
5. What has gone well for you this semester?

6. What challenges, if any, have you dealt with this semester and how have you addressed them?
7. What have you learned about yourself this semester?
8. Have there been any blessings in disguise for you during your experience so far in graduate school? If so, what are they?
9. Based on your experience, would you say the following statement is true or false: I think I would be a strong mentor for a fellow student who is entering graduate study next year. Why do you say that?