



*Reflections*

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## **Disconnected Connections: A Reflection on Maintaining Digital Accessibility and Connectivity for Housing Insecure Students in Higher Education during COVID-19**

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**F**ood and housing insecurity are two of the silent threats to participating in higher education and affect many students in community colleges and universities in the United States (King, 2018). In 2019, nearly 167,000 students from 227 higher education institutions (HEIs) responded to a survey conducted by The Hope Center. This survey indicated that “39% of respondents were food insecure in the prior 30 days, 46% of respondents were housing insecure in the previous year, [and] 17% of respondents were homeless in the previous year” (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 2). The topics of food and housing insecurity among students in HEIs have been consistent barriers to higher education participation and success (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Broton, 2019), especially among vulnerable student populations (Maynard et al., 2018). During the year 2020, the global pandemic exacerbated these barriers and demanded expedient institutional responses.

The global pandemic of the coronavirus or COVID-19 has caused many higher education institutions in the United States to rethink their priorities and reassess issues of equity in education (UNESCO, 2020). As HEIs began to close their campuses, teaching was promptly shifted to an online format, and students were asked to move out of campus housing. Housing insecure students struggled with the uncertainty of returning to an unstable housing situation which was further complicated by the predicament of securing means of remaining connected to the required digital learning environment. While withstanding the barriers of housing insecurity, students had to obtain internet access and required technology tools for digital participation which became an additional

hurdle for them. Certainly, these sudden transformations at HEIs revealed a noticeable difference between students who had access to the tools and resources needed to continue to digitally participate in their education and those who did not (Flannery, 2020). Without a doubt, COVID-19 revealed many challenges of equity for vulnerable groups within HEIs (Crow & Anderson, 2020), including housing insecure students.

The purpose of this reflection essay is to shed light on two important struggles housing insecure students in higher education are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic: housing insecurity (Bramhall, 2020) and maintaining digital accessibility and connectivity (Wust, 2020). We interviewed students, pseudonyms used to maintain anonymity, about their experiences as a housing insecure student. Within this essay, we discuss COVID-19 and how housing insecurity impacted digital accessibility. Next, we explore COVID-19 and digital accessibility and connectivity by shedding light on the restrictions implemented and how they affected students during COVID-19. Specifically, those students reliant upon the digital and internet resources available at their university campuses were suddenly obligated to establish resources independently to continue making academic progress. Finally, we will conclude the reflection by sharing the current impact on trends in higher education that have resulted as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## COVID-19 AND HOUSING INSECURITY

**T**hough housing insecurity can be a state of being without permanent shelter, persons experiencing housing insecurity may have a domicile but the permanency is compromised by an inability to pay monthly living expenses on a consistent basis (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). The issue of housing insecurity is a tangled situation riddled with uncertainties concerning issues surrounding social constructs, access to adequate housing, health care, and financial resources, as well as social injustice (Terui & Hsieh, 2016). Some of the monthly expenses that may compromise housing security include mortgage or rent, electric, gas, water and sewage, internet, and telephone bills. Many people who face housing insecurity find themselves in difficult situations. They are often forced to navigate unstable living conditions due to evictions or the expiration of allowances. As a result, housing insecure individuals find refuge in residing with others intermittently—a practice known as couch surfing. Couch surfing is sleeping on the couch or floor of a friend or family member temporarily due to the lack of shelter (Curry et al., 2017; Vasquez et al., 2018). The practice of couch surfing is, perhaps, among the safest short-term solutions for housing insecure individuals who have to deal with their reality and plan a way to secure shelter (Hail-Jares et al., 2020).

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, traditional higher education institutions found themselves in a position that required them to quickly shift from face-to-face course lectures to online learning management systems. For students with stable housing arrangements,

the thought of being without digital technology tools and internet service that connected them to their HEIs was not an immediate concern or obstacle. However, for students facing housing insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic placed them in an inauspicious position. Many had to leave campus as HEIs were not equipped to provide long-term emergency shelter for students, especially international students. All of these abrupt, unsupported changes compounded the challenges housing insecure students have to deal with in addition to housing while exposing additional needs neglected by HEIs (Fabian et al., 2020). For example, in addition to addressing physiological concerns, housing insecure students must also manage their mental and emotional wellbeing. Navigating the emotional terrain of housing insecurity coupled with COVID-19 left housing insecure students with an almost immediate distress. Similar to the experiences shared by Fabian et al. (2020), when housing insecure students were told “Come on, go home now” (p. 19), they responded, “Where is home?” (p. 19).

To reiterate, we interviewed housing insecure students attending HEIs and asked them to share with us how this new reality is affecting them physically and emotionally. Marcos shared with us his current reality that speaks to how COVID-19 caused an upheaval in his mental and emotional wellbeing:

COVID-19 has impacted my housing situation by reigniting the anxiousness I feel towards not having enough money to stay in my current residence—even after accounting for the money I saved from my previous job and the CARES [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security] Act stimulus money I received. Though I have never been late on rent payments for my current location, I constantly have anxiety about executing another job search and also figuring out how to establish multiple streams of income and add to my investment portfolio. As you read this, I am communicating with an advocacy group about helping pay for July's rent on an emergency basis. My coursework participation has been subpar, in my opinion, due to suicidal ideation back in April when multiple friends and family members from out of state contracted SARS-CoV-2 [COVID-19]. Worrying about those people in my personal life, along with trying to finish all four of my courses online, worsened my Major Depressive Disorder and made things nearly unbearable. My professors have been available and worked with me to complete certain assignments, but episodes of my depression made it substantially more challenging to remember what I studied and finish work ahead of schedule.

### COVID-19 AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

**A**lthough housing insecurity might seem like the most pressing issue because it represents the most basic physiological needs, securing stable digital connectivity also became an additional topic of concern for housing insecure students in HEIs. Digital connectivity in higher education refers to having the ability to use digital technology tools such as a cellphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer, to connect and participate in higher education course work and activities (Kim et al., 2019). Before COVID-19, it was probable that HEIs had not considered digital connectivity an issue for participation because their students were able to access online learning platforms while on their premises. However, being forced off the campus became a

reminder to concerned stakeholders of the struggles housing insecure students face outside of the protection of HEIs campuses. The assumption at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic for many in higher education was that shifting to a fully online format would be an uncomplicated transition. However, the reality is that many students do not have reliable access to technology tools and stable internet service to withstand such an immediate and drastic change (Flaherty, 2020).

Whereas having access to education has been determined to be a right of residents (McHugh & Morawski, 2015; *Plyler v. Doe*, 1982), this right is not inclusive of in-home internet access.

*Lack of digital connectivity, therefore, translates to being digitally ostracized.*

According to the latest data available, in the United States, 10% of residents do not have broadband access (Arias, 2020). It is therefore a major hindrance to accessing educational opportunities when 10% of the 329,877,505 residents in the United States—32,987,750 people—are without internet access (US Census Bureau, 2020). Lack of digital connectivity, therefore, translates to being digitally ostracized. This inequity was further compounded by the HEI's assumption that internet access would be available when transitioning to online learning. For students whose only source of shelter and connection to the HEI's digital components was being on campus, the prospect of successfully navigating and connecting to the digitally-dependent classrooms from an unstable housing situation became bleak. In the wake of HEI closures, students were left without much-needed support to include not having the necessary technology tools, poor internet access situations, and lacking needed utility services with which to charge laptops, phones, and tablets.

Danielle is one of the students who was directly impacted by the abrupt, unsupported transition to online instruction. She shared with us her current reality that speaks to how trying to maintain digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic caused angst and required her to creatively solve issues that were beyond the scope of the emergency plan at her higher education institution:

Although I had a cellphone to connect to iCollege [online learning platform], I no longer had an electrical outlet with which to charge my phone. The only place I could charge was the bathroom at my storage facility or the train station. So, power was an issue. I had a basic MetroPCS plan with no mobile Hotspot (\$30 per month) so I had to upgrade my plan to be able to use the internet from my laptop (it's hard to write a 2-page paper from your cellphone). I didn't necessarily have the funds to afford the upgrade, and I couldn't make use of Comcast's predatory 'free service for 60 days' because I was already in arrears with them and did not qualify. Finally, my teachers assumed that we were somehow on vacation due to the shutdown and assigned t[w]o additional projects and a group project. Some of my classmates lost family members and she [one of Danielle's professors] didn't seem to understand or care that we were not mentally prepared to stack on the workload. I suppose privilege, like ignorance, is bliss.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed present vulnerabilities in higher education (Crow & Anderson, 2020). Disruption to the normal manner in which higher education was delivered revealed that access to stable housing, technology tools, and the internet caused some students to struggle to meet satisfactory academic progress expectations. Consequently, housing insecurity greatly impacted some students' ability to maintain the required stable digital connection for an online learning environment. In reflection, higher education institutions must establish crisis plans that include provisions for students who are experiencing housing insecurity. With the establishment of a contingency plan, HEIs will be better equipped to support vulnerable students as they transition to an environment that may not be conducive to maintaining educational pursuits. This added measure will encourage continued academic progress and potentially support greater academic success despite experiencing a crisis.

As we anticipate being in a post-pandemic world, many lessons have been learned. Higher education institutions should develop strategic policies to address inequities that were present before and are being amplified throughout the pandemic. Future initiatives could include the institution of emergency funding programs for all HEIs to support students who need special grants to cover the costs of basic physiological and academic needs such as housing, food, technology, and internet service (Bramhall, 2020). In addition, the development of support networks including community foundations, national initiatives, and financial support from larger entities must be established to identify and provide wrap-around services for this vulnerable student population. As a nation aspiring to be socially just, protecting financial investments to meet the housing, technology, and internet needs of higher education students (HUD, 2015) ensures equitable access to educational success. At the same time, investing in the educational development of our future workforce also promotes higher chances of better qualified, stable, and satisfied professionals. Failure to acknowledge the importance of developing plans addressing the needs and concerns of vulnerable students during crises demonstrates apathy, which further broadens the gaps between individuals with resources and those who are disadvantaged.

*Failure to acknowledge the importance of developing plans addressing the needs and concerns of vulnerable students during crises demonstrates apathy, which further broadens the gaps between individuals with resources and those who are disadvantaged.*

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