

“Everything you do as a grad student is a gamble”: The graduate student employee COVID-19 experience

Posted on July 30, 2020 by Teri Del Rosso

This is the third in a series of essays on “Higher Ed Wall-to Wall in Tennessee,” which will continue for the rest of this week. This series of posts highlights voices and union-led campaigns on higher-ed campuses across Tennessee. We hope to offer both a picture of the challenges that we face and perhaps some organizing solutions, particularly to other higher education employees in right-to-work states, to help navigate the shifting academic terrain that we are experiencing in the face of COVID-19. The series was organized by Andrea Ringer.

Names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the brave students who were willing to speak with me. Their emotional labor was compensated.

Lidiana was speaking passionately. Although she told me she was experiencing COVID-19 symptoms—and hoped the results from the test she took the previous day would delivered in the next 24-hours—talking about her experience was important, even if saying it was literally and figuratively hard. She wanted to stress the fact that her academic interests coalesced around the exact issues COVID-19 was thrusting out of the shadows and into the light—how access and privilege—or lack thereof, affects everything. She was explaining to me her situation as a doctoral student in the social sciences, about what it was like to get the email about moving online and what that would do for her students, her own coursework, and the relationship she had with the faculty and advisers in her department. As she stressed topic after topic that concerned her, she concluded and sighed, “Everything you do as a grad student is a gamble.”

A Tale of Two Departments

Through my four conversations with graduate students, this idea of a “gamble” was apparent: one’s COVID-19 experience was linked to how *others* could, and would, handle the crisis. Some graduate students spoke of “lucking out” and winning the lottery regarding

their department or the faculty/advisers they worked with. For example, two STEM-field students, Jolene and Brooke, explained how the transition to online in spring wasn't difficult at all. Brooke explained about how well she was taken care of through her department's treatment of graduate students *before* the crisis. She explained that the department was proactive in their communication and that they made the transition to work from home easy, and those who were working in labs were practicing social distancing with PPE.

Jolene, a fifth year ABD Ph.D. student, noted that her research assistantship was dependent on an externally funded grant. COVID-19 forced Jolene's job part-time job online, which resulted in her being furloughed. Her adviser was a strong advocate on the research team's behalf, even going to the university president to ask for essential worker status so the grant work could continue, which meant Jolene could continue receiving paychecks. Graduate employees like Jolene and Brooke underscored how lucky they felt. The "gamble" never felt as risky, because their department worked to mitigate and handle that risk on their behalf.

Other students were left scrambling and guessing how to move forward. Lidiana received word that classes were moving online and was left with little guidance on what to do with her class of introductory students. She explained how she cut assignments, built in flexible deadlines, and took on the responsibility of professor, counselor, and advocate, without much leadership from her advisers, professors, and mentors.

Logun, a recently graduated master's student in social sciences, told me before COVID-19 he was "quote-unquote working 20 hours a week" (suggesting that part-time work as a teaching assistant was never quite part-time) as the front facing instructor of a class of 50 undergraduates. When he got word that the campus was moving online, Logun returned home from a service trip to begin prepping his class. He expressed his concern for his students' well-being, and wanted the transition to be as easy as possible. As he explained how he moved things around and polled the students on their needs and preferences, he casually mentioned the out-of-pocket costs associated with doing things right. "The university had their stuff..." he told me, "but if something out there was better, I was willing to take on the burden to spend my own money to get that software for my students."

Healthcare vs. "insurance"

“I’m pretty fearful all day, every day,” Logun told me. He longed for the privilege of having health insurance and the ability to not worry about how or when he got sick. “Other illnesses don’t go on vacation just because the coronavirus is here,” we uneasily laughed together after he mentioned how difficult it is to visit the dentist, eye doctor, and primary care.

A common thread among the stories was the lack of a comprehensive, affordable healthcare plan that could adequately keep up with a person’s needs, which was a problem before COVID-19. Jolene was set to get married in April. She downsized the original event and shifted it to an intimate paperwork affair. Jolene pointed out she had no other choice: “I had to get on his health insurance.”

Lidiana had similar grievances against the university supplied insurance option, and explained how COVID-19 was affecting her physically and mentally. Although she was privileged to be able to quarantine, the act of sheltering in place was wreaking havoc on Lidiana’s mental health. And once she started to develop COVID symptoms, Lidiana had to weigh the options of getting treatment versus waiting it out. She finally decided that her financial best bet was to go to the emergency room, rather than wait for things to get “so bad” and be forced to call an ambulance, which was something she couldn’t afford.

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A call-to-action

This gamble cannot and should not fall on the most vulnerable among us in higher

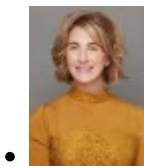
education. As professors, deans, provosts, and presidents meet to decide whether this fall we meet on campus, online, or some hybrid of the two, the lived experience, struggles, and challenges facing graduate student employees must be a top priority as decisions are made. If grad student employees cannot feel empowered to head to the ER when they are experiencing chest pains (a symptom of COVID-19), many may not feel empowered to sit out of the classroom, since so much of their current reality and future is tied to their performance as both students *and* employees. **Graduate student employees need comprehensive affordable healthcare and paid sick leave.**

Each student interviewed called upon the university as a whole to consider mitigating those risks that largely fall on graduate students. Graduate voices need to be included on steering committees and working groups, especially when it comes to how to move forward during the pandemic. As Logun suggested: “If I’m going to be the face of the university, I should also have a voice.” **Graduate student employee representation must be prioritized.**

A professor’s reflection on what’s happening to graduate employees during COVID-19

It was an honor to speak to these four graduate student employees about their experiences during the last three months. These interviews were conducted in the midst of the fight for Black lives, as thousands of people flood the streets to protest police brutality and honor the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, among countless others. The collective and individual trauma is great, and universities *must* do everything they can to mitigate and actively avoid this. This is especially true of universities, like my own, that have a large percentage of its student body identifying as Black or as a person of color—we must do better. This public health crisis has exposed just how many vulnerable campus workers there are, and just how deep those vulnerabilities are. As we move forward, we must guarantee no layoffs, a commitment to chop from the top, and prioritize the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of our friends, colleagues, peers, and students.

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