

5-31-2020

## **A Look at Empathy, University Belonging, and Intersectionality: How to Support a Diverse Student Body Amid the COVID-19 Crisis**


Shantalea Johns

*Wayne State University*, shantalea@wayne.edu

Stephanie Hawkes

*Wayne State University*, gd2711@wayne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/soc\\_work\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/soc_work_pubs)

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Education Policy Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Social Work Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Johns, S., & Hawkes, S. (2020). A Look at Empathy, University Belonging, and Intersectionality: How to Support a Diverse Student Body Amid the COVID-19 Crisis. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, 9(2), 370-373. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jise.v9i2.2407>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Work Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

## **A Look at Empathy, University Belonging, and Intersectionality: How to Support a Diverse Student Body Amid the COVID-19 Crisis**

Shantalea Johns

Stephanie Hawkes

*Wayne State University, USA*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*The present short essay discusses the impact COVID-19 has had on college students. As universities work to build supportive learning environments during these unprecedented times, it is important for practitioners to consider how mental health and student identity impact student success. The framework proposes that empathy, university belonging, and an intersectional approach to academic support can contribute to a student's mental health, identity, and emotional well-being as they transition back to academic life.*

**Keywords:** COVID 19, student success

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students across the country moved to online learning environments while caring for themselves and their families. Few studies have explored the potential impact the pandemic has had on student's mental and emotional wellbeing, specifically the onset of chronic stress, PTSD, depression, somatization, and other forms of mental illness that may be linked to COVID-19 experiences (Lederman, 2020 & Horne, 2020). The*

*conditions mentioned above may be further exacerbated for students who are more vulnerable to inequalities in higher education. These inequalities could include previous difficulties in academic and social integration at a university or gaps in relevant interventions required to care for their physical or mental health. This article examines the relative impact of empathy, university belonging, and an intersectional approach to academic support on students' transition from COVID-19 stress to academic success.*

## **TRAUMA AND COVID-19**

Studies conducted before COVID-19 found that traumatic events may show severe impairment to comprehend lessons, maintain attention during class instruction, meet deadlines, or suppress impulse-control appropriately (Cole, 2013; Carrion et al., 2013). More recently, the Active Minds (2020) student survey found that eight in 10 of students reported having a difficult time focusing on their studies and avoiding distractions, and 74% found it challenging to maintain a routine due to COVID-19. The significant challenge for educators working with highly stressed or traumatized college students then comes down to finding ways to help students move from COVID-19 stress to feeling safe enough to learn.

### **Understanding Intersectionality**

One best practice on how to support students is an understanding of students as a whole person and the implications of their intersecting identities. Crenshaw (1991) first coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how power operates to create systems where black women are oppressed based on their gender and race. Since its emergence, intersectionality has been used to describe oppression more broadly across a wide array of identities. In her words, "intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It is not merely that there is a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things." The understanding and application of intersectionality are critical as we work to support students through this crisis, as they all carry intersecting identities that may marginalize and exclude them from their educational pursuits.

### **The Practice of Empathy**

Researchers define empathy as a form of social communication that recognizes and responds to another person's thoughts or feelings with an appropriate emotion (Hybels & Weaver, 2009). When students with trauma histories come to college, it is essential to connect with them through empathy and to work to understand their unique identities, backgrounds, and experiences as they grapple with the stressors of COVID-19. In university settings, practicing empathy means (a) using the student's preferred name, (b) encouraging students to express themselves (c) being fully present (d) giving genuine recognition and praise (e) show students care and have a natural curiosity about their lives (f) not interrupting or rushing to give advice (g) observing non-verbal communication.

### **University belonging**

A first step in creating university belonging is to have a proactive communication plan for students that will engage them within the institution in meaningful ways and to build trust and resilience in times of uncertainty (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Maslow (1954) identified belonging as a basic human need. Students, especially those from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds, want to feel respected and valued at their institution. This means that creating a sense of belonging for students helps them to feel valued at the university. Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and essential to campus community or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (p. 3). One method for identifying and supporting students belonging is to connect them early on to people whom they will have frequent interaction with like faculty members, mentors, and academic advisors (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). Staff and administrators from diversity, equity, and inclusion centers are experts in understanding underrepresented and marginalized students and are excellent partners for providing resources and support as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

Our students bring their hidden stories to us. It is our goal to translate what we know about university belonging, empathy, and intersectionality into student support services as we navigate through the COVID-19 crisis.

### **REFERENCES**

- Active Minds (2020). "The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Mental Health." COVID-19 Student Survey.
- Chessman, H., Morgan T, (2019). "College Student Mental Health and Well-Being: A Survey of Presidents."
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Horne, L. (2020) "Supporting a Healthy Campus Community During COVID-19." Active Minds Blog. April 20, 2020.  
<https://www.activeminds.org/blog/supporting-a-healthy-campus-community-during-covid-19/>
- Hybels, S. & Weaver, R. (2009). Communicating effectively. New York. NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Lederman, Doug. (2020). "Presidents Fear Financial, and Human, Toll of Coronavirus." Inside Higher Ed, March 27, 2020.  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/college-presidents-fear-financial-and-human-toll-coronavirustheir-campuses>.
- Maslow, A. H., Frager, R., Fadiman, J., McReynolds, C., & Cox, R. (1987). Motivation and personality (3rd). *New York*.
- Strayhorn, T. (2012). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schreiner, L. A., Noel, P., Anderson, E., & Cantwell, L. (2011). The impact of faculty and staff on high-risk college student persistence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(3), 321–338
- Wilson, S., & Gore, J. (2013). An attachment model of university connectedness. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 81(2), 178–198.

---

**Shantalea Johns**, EdD, LMSW is the director of continuing and interprofessional education and a lecturer at Wayne State University School of Social Work in Detroit, MI. Her major research interests lie in the area of neurobiology of trauma and the social determinant of poor mental health among urban African American youth from adolescence to early adulthood. Email: [shantalea@wayne.edu](mailto:shantalea@wayne.edu)

**STEPHANIE HAWKES**, EdD, is the Assistant Director for the Office of Multicultural Student Engagement at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Her research interests lie in the area of postsecondary access, retention, and success of students from historically excluded populations. Email: [gd2711@wayne.edu](mailto:gd2711@wayne.edu)

*Manuscript submitted: May 5, 2020*  
*Accepted for publication: October 15, 2020*

---