

Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Social Work Students: Burnout and Resilience During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract: COVID-19 had a profound impact on teaching and learning at academic institutions across the globe. This study examined the experiences of social work students ($n = 884$) during the pandemic and their associated level of burnout. Using a mixed methods approach, data from an online survey within a school of social work at a large Midwestern university were examined using stepwise regression and thematic analysis. Student demographics, academic characteristics, and experiences with COVID-19 were examined as predictors of burnout. Resilience was tested as a moderator of the association between COVID-19 experiences and burnout. Regression models accounted for 34.3% to 45.5% of variance across three domains of burnout (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and professional/academic efficacy), with COVID-related experiences accounting for most of the variance. Although resilience had a significant main effect, the interactions of resilience and COVID-19 experiences were not significant. Quantitative results were illuminated by thematic analysis of the qualitative data from which emerged four major themes: online teaching pedagogy, impact of COVID-19, transition of teaching and learning, and affective domains of learning. Engaging in humanistic education is discussed as a possible approach to circumvent burnout, bolster student resilience, and encourage academic success.

Keywords: Burnout, COVID-19, resilience, social work education

In March 2020, the World Health Organization identified COVID-19 as a global pandemic. While bringing about significant global changes, COVID-19 profoundly impacted the academic sector (Apgar & Cadmus, 2021). With an emphasis on physical distancing to decrease the spread of the virus, colleges and universities across the United States cancelled in-person classes and rapidly shifted to emergency remote instruction (Quintana, 2020; Smalley, 2020). Similarly, some academic accrediting bodies such as the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2020) modified student expectations and activities, such as decreasing the number of required hours and allowing for remote field activities.

The challenges of COVID-19 have been exacerbated by considerable uncertainty surrounding its impact and a lack of research to support best practices within academe (Afrouz, 2021; Apgar & Cadmus, 2021; Holmes et al., 2020). For applied disciplines like social work, the impact may be further increased in field placements where students, who have already experienced disrupted employment, increased caregiving demands, and decreased social contact, began working with pandemic-challenged clients (Gonzalez-

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Ramirez et al., 2021; Saltzman et al., 2021).

The Impact of a Pandemic

Emergent research identified significant burnout and stress among healthcare workers involved in the frontlines of the pandemic. For example, Nishimura et al. (2021) noted that medical providers who worked in intensive care or who directly treated clients with COVID-19 were 6.7 to 8.5 times more likely to experience burnout than those in general medicine. Similarly, Murat et al. (2020) observed high levels of stress and burnout as well as moderate levels of depression among nurses. Those who were younger, had less experience, tested positive for COVID-19, or who did not voluntarily work during the pandemic were at greatest risk.

Social work practitioners were also challenged by COVID-19 as many lacked sufficient preparation for delivering online services. Banks et al. (2020) noted that, across the globe, social work practitioners encountered numerous ethical challenges, including the unique nature of remote relationships, whether to adhere to policies, managing limited resources, and ensuring the well-being of self and colleagues. For those delivering group interventions, video conferencing elevated concerns with client confidentiality, suppressed group dynamics, and made it difficult for practitioners to observe nonverbal behaviors among group members (Hung et al., 2021). Yet, despite challenges, COVID-19 also presented social work practitioners with the opportunity to become creative and to develop a greater appreciation for client resources and improve access to services (Mishna et al., 2021).

Within the academic sector, COVID-19 has impacted students via online learning demands, including gaining access to information and computer technology, and securing a private and quiet workspace. In subsequent research, emergency remote instruction due to COVID-19 has been associated with decreased levels of motivation and poorer health behaviors (e.g., decreased exercise) among students (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Studies among social work students noted disrupted routines with sleeping, eating, and exercise; grief and loss; financial hardship; loss of motivation for coursework; increased depression and anxiety, increased smoking, and binge drinking (Apgar & Cadmus, 2021; Lawrence et al., 2021; Reznik et al., 2021). Similarly, Smoyer et al. (2020) found that many undergraduate social work students were challenged by the lack of human interaction and few opportunities for experiential learning (e.g., hands-on activities) often associated with face-to-face classes. Students reported that online learning limited opportunities for individual and group dialogue, which was exacerbated when synchronous opportunities were not provided or when written work was substituted for class meetings. However, synchronous classes offered students opportunities to discuss the course materials as well as their personal experiences with COVID-19.

Stress

Aside from the stress of a global pandemic, higher education is often associated with elevated levels of stress for students due to distance from familial support, substantial

academic workloads, financial concerns, and anxiety about the future (Shi, 2019). The impact of these stressors can put students at risk for a variety of health problems including sleep disturbances, substance use, depression, and anxiety (Hirsch et al. 2019; Leppink et al., 2016; Shi, 2019). Despite such considerations, there is often less emphasis on emotional regulation and less consideration of ways emotions impact student engagement and performance in higher education (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021).

While some amount of stress (e.g., deadlines, tests, etc.) can increase productivity and promote resiliency, periods of sustained stress can become toxic for the person's well-being (Baethge et al., 2018; Roming & Howard, 2019). The experience of stress is often dependent upon individual cognitive appraisal; that is, the person's unique and subjective interpretation of an event or experience as stressful and subsequent response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The person's perspective and their ability to cope with or buffer the effects of stress are often influenced by access to resources and engagement in self-care. Apgar and Cadmus (2021) found that BSW students engaged in various coping strategies during the pandemic, including acceptance or self-sufficiency, venting, use of social and emotional support, and distraction. They also noted that students developed new coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of COVID-19, including social media participation, mindfulness, positive reframing, and spirituality.

Resilience

Amid discussion of stress management, it is important to also consider psychological resilience. Resilience is the ability to cope with a stressor or to return to a pre-crisis state shortly after a crisis (Barzilay et al., 2020). Resilience is a multidimensional construct that is influenced by individual, biological, and cognitive factors (Poole et al., 2017). Among those in helping professions, resilience has been associated with lower levels of burnout and fatigue (Keesler & Troxel, 2020), and has moderated the effects of burnout on perceived health (García-Izquierdo et al., 2018). Similarly, Reznik et al. (2021) examined resilience and its correlates among Israeli and Russian social work students during COVID-19. Although they found significant differences in students' levels of resilience between the two countries, they also found that higher levels of resilience among social work students were associated with lower levels of fear surrounding COVID-19 and lower levels of psycho-emotional distress.

Positive Outcomes Associated With COVID-19

Despite the stressful reality of the pandemic, some good has emerged from the impact of COVID-19. For example, Earle and Freddolino (2021) noted that while the pandemic increased social work students' awareness of health disparities and inequalities in access to technology, it also provided students with additional education and experience in telehealth or e-therapy (Wilkerson et al., 2020). This is consistent with the National Association of Social Worker's (NASW, 2021) *Code of Ethics* that emphasizes the need for social workers to be aware of and critically evaluate emerging knowledge and technology relevant to social work practice. Similarly, Apgar and Cadmus (2021) noted that COVID-19 provided a "teachable moment" for students to learn firsthand about stress

and coping as they experienced the effects of the pandemic in various aspects of their daily life and functioning.

The broader literature provides insight regarding the positive and negative effects of COVID-19 on students; however, additional information is warranted. By examining unique considerations associated with the pandemic, as well as the influence of demographics and resilience on student burnout, we can more holistically understand social work students' experiences. Subsequently, we can generate data-driven responses to appropriately support their needs inside and outside the classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to understand the experiences of students during COVID-19 and the impact of resilience. Four specific research questions were examined:

- (1) What are students' experiences with COVID-19, burnout, and resilience?
- (2) How are students' levels of burnout (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy) influenced by their demographics and experiences with COVID-19?
- (3) To what extent does resilience moderate the relationship between students' experiences with COVID-19 and burnout?
- (4) What support do students seek from faculty to mitigate burnout?

Methods

Researchers at a large midwestern school of social work sought to understand student experiences during the pandemic to inform teaching strategies and the provision of student support. A survey comprised of several measures was created to gather data regarding student demographics, experiences with COVID-19, burnout, and resilience. The survey was uploaded to Qualtrics, an online survey platform, and pilot-tested with several students to ensure functionality and logistics. The survey included a total of 40 items and 2 open-ended questions and took 10-15 minutes to complete. Survey participation was incentivized with 10 \$25 e-gift cards to Amazon that were randomly distributed to students who provided their contact information via a separate link at the end of the survey. BSW and MSW students were recruited through an email that described the study and provided the survey link. The email was distributed to the entire student body at three time points from late November through early December 2020. A total of 884 students participated in the survey and represented 52% of the student population ($n = 1,692$).

The original purpose of the survey did not necessitate review and approval by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' university. However, because of the high student response rate and the ability for the findings to inform other scholars and programs, the data were re-analyzed as secondary data for the purposes of this study.

Measures

Demographics. Seven items were constructed to elicit information regarding student gender, ethnicity, age, academic status (i.e., full-time or part-time), program year (i.e., BSW junior or senior; MSW 1st year, 2nd year, or advanced standing), percentage of

coursework online (i.e., none, approximately 25%, 50%, 75% or 100%), and frequency of synchronous meetings for online courses (i.e., 5-point Likert-type scale; 1 = *never* to 5 *very frequently*).

COVID-19 Items. At the time of data collection, established measures to assess the impact of COVID-19 on students' academic experiences were unavailable. Similar to Sveinsdóttir et al. (2021), the research team developed 14 items for this study (see Table 2). The items were informed by the authors' interactions with students and faculty members following the onset of the pandemic and were revised through an iterative process for greater precision. The intention was not to develop a scale but rather to capture and explore individual aspects of student experiences. Item response options used a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Resilience. Resilience was measured using the Response to Stressful Experiences Scale-4 (RSES-4; De La Rosa et al., 2016). This instrument consists of four items that assess a person's response during and after a stressful event. Response options are based on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*exactly like me*). An item example is "I tend to find a way to what's necessary to carry on." Preliminary psychometric testing has supported the instrument's validity and reliability ($\alpha = 0.877$; De La Rosa et al., 2016). The RSES-4 demonstrated acceptable reliability in the current study ($\alpha = .734$). Scale scores were calculated as the sum of scores on the four items.

Maslach Burnout Inventory – Student Survey. The Maslach Burnout Inventory – Student Survey (MBI-SS) includes 15 items across three subscales: *exhaustion*, *cynicism*, and *professional efficacy* (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The exhaustion subscale consisted of five items that measure feelings of being strained and exhausted by schoolwork (e.g., "I feel emotionally drained by my studies"). The 4-item cynicism subscale measured indifference toward schoolwork (e.g., "I doubt the significance of my studies"). The 6-item professional efficacy sub-scale measured satisfaction with academic accomplishments and expectations of continued effectiveness (e.g., "I feel stimulated when I achieve my study goals"). Scale items were scored using a 7-point scale, ranging from 0 "never" to 6 "always." Subscale scores were calculated as the sum of scores on the respective items. Multiple studies have demonstrated the psychometric properties of the MBI-SS, including its reliability and validity (Nteveros et al., 2020; Portoghese et al., 2018) and its multi-factor structure that supports the use of three subscale scores rather than a total burnout score (Morgan et al., 2014; Pérez-Mármol & Brown, 2019). In the present study, the instrument demonstrated good to excellent reliability: exhaustion, $\alpha = .949$; cynicism, $\alpha = .908$; and professional efficacy, $\alpha = .824$ (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The measure is not accompanied by cut-off scores to determine *high*, *moderate*, and *low* levels of burnout. Although used in earlier research, cut-off scores have been recognized as problematic (Leiter & Maslach, 2016).

Open-Ended Questions. The survey included two open-ended questions to further describe student experiences: (1) How has COVID-19 impacted your beliefs, values, and/or attitudes as a social worker? (2) If you are struggling or burned out because of COVID, what suggestions do you have for faculty to support you? Data from the second question are included in the current study given the alignment of the question with the research questions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SAS (2013) statistical software. Data were examined to ensure appropriateness of the analytic plan. Approximately 5% of cases were missing some data and were addressed through pairwise deletion (Dong & Peng, 2013).

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, standard deviations) and correlations were calculated to examine student experiences with COVID-19, burnout, and resilience. To answer the second research question regarding the impact of COVID-19 on student burnout, three separate regression analyses were used to construct models that identified important predictors of burnout (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy). Stepwise regression analyses with forward selection were used to reduce the number of COVID-related predictors to a subset of important variables based on Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) for best model fit (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). The procedure was conducted in three steps. The first step included student demographics (i.e., age, gender, and ethnicity) as predictors. Given the sample distribution, ethnicity was collapsed to African American, Other, and White. The second step included academic variables (academic status, program year, percent of coursework that was online, and frequency of synchronous content) as predictors. The percentage of coursework online was recategorized such that students who indicated none to 50% were collapsed into a single group. The third step added only the COVID-19 variables that provided the best fitting model following forward selection procedures to create a parsimonious model.

The third research question sought to determine if resilience moderated the relationship between students' experiences with COVID-19 and burnout (i.e., the 3 MBI-SS subscales). A moderator variable affects the direction and/or strength of the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable (Aguinis & Gottfredson, 2010). Only those COVID-19 variables that were significant (and/or improved the AIC) in the regression models for the second research question were examined. Interaction terms were calculated as the product of resilience scores and the COVID-19 variables to test resilience as a moderator. Regression models were recalculated to examine the effects of the interaction terms.

The fourth research question sought to identify areas of support that students desired from faculty and staff. Data from a single open-ended question (i.e., "If you are struggling or feeling burned out because of COVID, what suggestions do you have for faculty to support you?") were analyzed using NVivo. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was conducted of responses provided by 633 students. Responses ranged from a few words to several sentences. Thirty-three codes emerged from the data using an open coding and iterative process. Data analysis reached saturation and codes were grouped into four main themes: 1) *online teaching pedagogy*; 2) *impact of COVID-19*; 3) *transition of teaching and learning*; and 4) *affective domains of learning*. Validity of coding was supported through triangulation with quantitative data and consultation with the second researcher (Carter et al., 2014).

Results

Sample

A total of 884 students (90.7% female, 73.9% Caucasian) participated in the online survey and are described in Table 1. On average, students were 28.8 years old (SD = 9.14) and ranged in age from 19 to 68 years. Two-thirds of students (65.4%) were in school full-time. The students were distributed across the BSW (38.6%) and MSW (61.4%) programs. Most students (91.6%) had coursework that was entirely online. Regarding online coursework, 89.6% of students had synchronous class meetings with varying frequency, from rarely (24.7%) to very frequently/weekly (25.1%).

Table 1. *Sample Demographics (n = 884)*

Demographic	n (%)
Gender	
Male	68 (7.7%)
Female	802 (90.7%)
Nonbinary	14 (1.6%)
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	653 (73.9%)
African American	108 (12.2%)
Latinx	65 (7.4%)
Other (includes First Nations, Asian, & Indian)	19 (2.1%)
More than one	39 (4.4%)
Academic Status	
Full-time	578 (65.4%)
Part-time	306 (34.6%)
Program Year *	
BSW Junior	195 (22.1%)
BSW Senior	146 (16.5%)
MSW 1 st Year	178 (20.1%)
MSW 2 nd Year	237 (26.8%)
MSW Advanced Standing	128 (14.5%)
Percentage of Coursework Online	
50% or less	17 (1.9%)
About 75%	57 (6.4%)
100%	810 (91.6%)
Frequency of Synchronous Meetings for Online Courses	
Never	92 (10.4%)
Rarely (once a month or less)	218 (24.7%)
Occasionally (about twice per month)	213 (24.1%)
Frequently (about three times per month)	139 (15.7%)
Very frequently (weekly)	222 (25.1%)

Note. * Three MSW categories reflect the categorization used at the respective institution. MSW 1st Year refers to the generalist year while both the MSW 2nd Year & MSW Advanced Standing students are in their specialization year; however, MSW Advanced Standing students have a BSW degree.

Student Experiences

The first research question sought to describe student experiences with COVID-19, burnout, and resilience. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, correlations) are presented below.

COVID-19. Frequencies and means for each of the COVID-related items are presented in Table 2. The percentages of students who *somewhat* and *strongly* agreed with each item ranged from a low of 26% (i.e., “The stressors I’ve experienced from COVID cause me to doubt that I will continue my studies”) to a high of 92.1% (i.e., “I worry about my health or the health of loved ones because of COVID”). All items, except for one (i.e., “The stressors I’ve experienced from COVID cause me to doubt that I will continue my studies”) were endorsed by more than 50% of the sample.

Table 2. *COVID-Related Items (n = 884)*

Item	Item Description	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	M (SD)
1	I worry about my financial resources because of the impact of COVID.	74.3	17.4	3.92 (1.25)
2	I feel isolated from others because of COVID.	82.4	9.5	4.16 (1.03)
3	I worry about my health or the health of loved ones because of COVID.	92.1	3.9	4.50 (.82)
4	The availability of the online courses has enabled me to continue my education during COVID.	84.8	5.9	4.34 (.96)
5	I feel disconnected from my peers/faculty because of learning online due to COVID.	70.5	17.1	3.86 (1.28)
6	I actively engage in some forms of healthy behaviors (e.g., exercise, nature, meditation) to promote my wellbeing during COVID.	72.3	19.9	3.75 (1.15)
7	I am unable to focus on my schoolwork because of COVID.	57.3	27.8	3.35 (1.29)
8	I am more supportive of my student peers because of COVID.	62.7	8.8	3.80 (1.00)
9	The stressors I’ve experienced with COVID make me even more determined to graduate.	56.8	18.0	3.66 (1.21)
10	The stressors I’ve experienced from COVID cause me to doubt that I will continue my studies.	26.0	63.1	2.27 (1.35)
11	On average, I am happy with the level of support I have received from faculty/staff since COVID.	65.6	19.0	3.70 (1.21)
12	I have the support necessary to cope with stress related to COVID.	73.2	16.1	3.82 (1.10)
13	During COVID, faculty continue to foster my learning in positive and meaningful ways.	74.2	14.6	3.90 (1.11)
14	During COVID, I want more real-time/live online course interaction with faculty/peers.	53.2	19.9	3.56 (1.24)

Note. *Agree* represents respondents who indicated “somewhat” and “strongly” agree. *Disagree* represents respondents who indicated “somewhat” and “strongly” disagree. Respondents who “neither agreed nor disagreed” were omitted to simplify the table.

Burnout. The ranges, means, and standard deviations for the three MBI-SS subscales are displayed in Table 3. On average, students demonstrated a higher level of efficacy, a moderate level of exhaustion, and a lower level of cynicism.

Resilience. The ranges, means, and standard deviations for resilience are displayed in Table 3. On average, students self-reported moderate levels of resilience. Correlations between and among resilience, student age, and the MBI-SS subscale scores are displayed in Table 3. All correlations were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Table 3. *Descriptive and Correlational Data*

Variable	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3	4
1. Age	19.0 – 68.0	28.83 (9.14)				
2. Exhaustion	0.0 – 30.0	17.66 (8.78)	-.250**	.663**		
3. Cynicism	0.0 – 24.0	8.38 (7.22)	-.228**	-.324**		
4. Professional Efficacy	0.0 – 36.0	28.44 (6.11)	.155**	-.314**	-.471**	
5. Resilience	7.0 – 20.0	15.91 (2.56)	.215**	.663**	-.291**	.423**

Note. *($p < .05$). ** ($p < .01$).

Predicting Burnout

The second research question sought to understand the impact of student demographics and experiences with COVID-19 on student burnout.

Exhaustion. The results of the stepwise regression for exhaustion are displayed in Table 4. The final model was statistically significant [$F(21, 828) = 32.92, p < .001$] and accounted for 45.5% of variance in exhaustion. Personal and academic variables accounted for 11.8% of variance in student exhaustion; however, experiences associated with COVID-19 accounted for an additional 33.7% of variance in exhaustion. Age, gender, academic status, synchronicity of classes, and various COVID-19 experiences were significant predictors of students' exhaustion. More specifically, older age ($p < .01$), being part-time ($p < .001$), having the support necessary to cope with stress related to COVID-19 ($p < .01$), and having faculty during the pandemic who continued to foster student learning in positive and meaningful ways ($p < .01$) predicted lower levels of student exhaustion. In contrast, however, identifying as female ($p < .01$), having synchronous classes frequently or very frequently ($p < .05$), feeling isolated during COVID-19, as well as being unable to focus on schoolwork and doubting continuation of studies due to the pandemic were significant ($p < .01$) predictors of higher levels of student exhaustion. Student ethnicity, program year, and percent of coursework online were unrelated to level of exhaustion.

Cynicism. The results for the stepwise regression for cynicism are displayed in Table 5. The final model was statistically significant [$F(21, 823) = 31.28, p < .001$] and accounted for 44.4% of the variance in cynicism. While personal and academic variables accounted for 9.3% of variance in student cynicism, COVID variables accounted for an additional 35.1% of variance in cynicism. Age, academic status, academic program year, synchronicity of classes, and multiple COVID-19 items were significant predictors of student cynicism. More specifically, older age ($p < .01$), being a part-time student ($p < .01$), feeling more determined to finish the academic program ($p < .001$), being happy with level

of support from faculty during COVID-19 ($p < .01$) and, having faculty that continued to foster learning in positive ways ($p < .001$) predicted lower levels of cynicism. However, being an advanced standing MSW student ($p < .01$) and having synchronous classes frequently or very frequently ($p < .05$), as well as being unable to focus on school ($p < .001$) and having doubt about continuing in one's academic program because of COVID-19 ($p < .001$) predicted higher levels of cynicism. Gender, ethnicity, and percent of online coursework were not significant predictors of cynicism.

Professional/Academic Efficacy. The results of the stepwise regression for efficacy are displayed in Table 6. The final model was statistically significant [$F(22, 818) = 19.38, p < .001$] and accounted for 34.3% of the variance in efficacy. Personal and academic variables accounted for 6.2% of the variance in student efficacy and the COVID -19 variables accounted for an additional 28.1%. Student age, academic program year, percentage of coursework online, and multiple COVID-19 items were significant predictors of student efficacy. More specifically, older age ($p < .05$), having 75% or more of coursework online ($p < .05$), engaging in healthy behaviors during COVID-19 ($p < .001$), feeling more determined to graduate ($p < .001$), having the support necessary to cope during COVID-19 ($p < .05$), and having faculty who foster student learning in meaningful ways ($p < .001$) were associated with higher levels of student efficacy. Significant predictors of lower efficacy included being a BSW senior or MSW student in the 2nd year of the program ($p < .05$), the inability to focus on school because of COVID-19 ($p < .001$) and having doubt about continuing in the academic program ($p < .01$). Gender, ethnicity, and frequency of synchronous classes were not significant predictors of student efficacy.

Resilience as a Moderating Factor

The third research question sought to ascertain if resilience moderated the relationship between students' experiences with COVID-19 and student burnout. Although resilience had a significant main effect in each model, predicting lower exhaustion ($B = -0.283$; 95% CI: $-0.474, -0.093$), lower cynicism ($B = -0.163$; 95% CI: $-0.322, -0.004$), and higher efficacy ($B = 0.585$; 95% CI: $0.440, 0.729$), all interactions between resilience and COVID-19 variables were not significant (the results are not presented). So, while students with higher resilience experienced less burnout, resilience did not moderate the effects of COVID-19 as measured in this study.

Student Support

The fourth research question sought to identify the supports students wanted from faculty to help mitigate burnout. Four major themes emerged from the data: *Online Teaching Pedagogy, Impact of COVID-19, Transition of Teaching and Learning, and Affective Domains of Learning.*

Table 4. *Stepwise Regression for Exhaustion*

Characteristic	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>
Age	-0.22	0.03	-0.24	<.001	-0.18	0.03	-0.18	<.001	-0.08	0.03	-0.09	0.002
Gender ^a												
Female	2.40	1.12	0.08	0.03	2.04	1.11	0.07	0.07	2.23	0.88	0.07	0.01
Other	6.78	2.59	0.09	0.01	6.39	2.56	0.09	0.01	1.94	2.03	0.03	0.34
Race ^b												
African American	-1.07	0.91	-0.04	0.24	-0.89	0.90	-0.03	0.32	-0.31	0.72	-0.01	0.66
Other	0.08	0.86	0.003	0.93	-0.13	0.86	-0.01	0.88	-0.77	0.68	-0.03	0.25
Academic Status ^c												
Part Time					-2.84	0.71	-0.15	<.001	-2.01	0.57	-0.11	<.001
Program Year ^d												
BSW Senior					0.94	0.94	0.04	0.32	0.54	0.74	0.02	0.46
MSW 1 st Year					-1.62	0.96	-0.07	0.09	-0.76	0.76	-0.03	0.32
MSW 2 nd Year					1.02	0.93	0.05	0.27	0.66	0.74	0.03	0.37
MSW Adv. Standing					0.31	1.03	0.01	0.76	0.47	0.81	0.02	0.56
Percent Online ^e												
About 75%					-1.83	2.35	-0.05	0.44	-0.20	1.86	-0.01	0.91
100%					-1.75	2.07	-0.06	0.40	-0.57	1.63	-0.02	0.73
Synchronous Classes ^f												
Rarely					-0.61	1.09	-0.03	0.58	0.84	0.86	0.04	0.33
Occasionally					-1.97	1.10	-0.10	0.07	0.37	0.88	0.02	0.68
Frequently					-0.19	1.20	-0.01	0.88	2.34	0.96	0.10	0.02
Very Frequently					0.80	1.10	0.04	0.47	3.24	0.89	0.16	<.001
COVID-19 ^g												
(2) Isolated									0.84	0.23	0.10	0.001
(7) Unable to Focus									2.34	0.21	0.34	<.001
(10) Doubt Continue									1.21	0.20	0.19	<.001
(12) Support to Cope									-0.87	0.26	-0.11	0.001
(13) Faculty Foster									-0.88	0.25	-0.11	0.001
R ²		0.073				0.118				0.455		
F-Value		13.32***				6.970***				32.92***		

Note. ^aReference group = Male. ^bReference group = White. ^cReference group = Full-time. ^dReference group = BSW Junior. ^eReference group = < 75%. ^fReference group = Never. ^gThe numbers refer to the items as they appear in Table 2. ****p* <.001

Table 5. *Stepwise Regression for Cynicism*

Characteristic	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>
Age	-0.18	0.03	-0.22	<.001	-0.17	0.03	-0.21	<.001	-0.08	0.02	-0.10	<.001
Gender ^a												
Female	0.51	0.93	0.02	0.58	-0.01	0.93	0.00	0.99	0.47	0.73	0.02	0.52
Other	4.89	2.15	0.08	0.02	4.48	2.14	0.08	0.04	1.81	1.69	0.03	0.28
Race ^b												
African American	-0.75	0.76	-0.03	0.32	-0.42	0.76	-0.02	0.58	0.18	0.61	0.01	0.77
Other	-0.35	0.71	-0.02	0.62	-0.15	0.72	-0.01	0.84	-0.45	0.56	-0.02	0.43
Academic Status ^c												
Part Time					-1.82	0.60	-0.12	0.002	-1.54	0.47	-0.10	0.001
Program Year ^d												
BSW Senior					0.67	0.79	0.03	0.40	0.54	0.62	0.03	0.39
MSW 1 st Year					-0.04	0.81	0.00	0.96	0.41	0.63	0.02	0.52
MSW 2 nd Year					2.30	0.78	0.14	0.004	1.86	0.62	0.11	0.003
MSW Adv. Standing					1.69	0.86	0.08	0.05	1.77	0.68	0.09	0.01
Percent Online ^e												
About 75%					-3.08	2.01	-0.10	0.13	-2.10	1.58	-0.07	0.18
100%					-3.15	1.78	-0.12	0.08	-2.67	1.40	-0.10	0.06
Synchronous Classes ^f												
Rarely					-0.05	0.92	0.00	0.96	1.10	0.72	0.07	0.13
Occasionally					-1.61	0.93	-0.10	0.08	0.80	0.74	0.05	0.28
Frequently					-0.84	1.01	-0.04	0.41	1.87	0.81	0.10	0.02
Very Frequently					-0.88	0.92	-0.05	0.34	1.88	0.74	0.11	0.01
COVID-19 ^g												
(7) Unable to Focus									1.39	0.17	0.25	<.001
(9) More Determined									-1.09	0.17	-0.18	<.001
(10) Doubt Continue									0.85	0.16	0.16	<.001
(11) Happy Support									-0.73	0.22	-0.12	0.001
(13) Faculty Foster									-1.30	0.26	-0.20	<.001
R ²		0.059				0.093				0.444		
F-Value		10.58***				5.27***				31.28***		

Note. ^aReference group = Male. ^bReference group = White. ^cReference group = Full-time. ^dReference group = BSW Junior. ^eReference group = < 75%. ^fReference group = Never. ^gThe numbers refer to the items as they appear in Table 2. ****p* <.001

Table 6. *Stepwise Regression for Efficacy*

Characteristic	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>
Age	0.09	0.02	0.14	<.001	0.11	0.03	0.16	<.001	0.05	0.02	0.07	0.03
Gender ^a												
Female	0.02	0.80	0.001	0.98	0.31	0.80	0.01	0.70	0.18	0.67	0.01	0.79
Other	-2.40	1.84	-0.05	0.19	-2.31	1.84	-0.05	0.21	-0.10	1.56	0.00	0.95
Race ^b												
African American	1.08	0.65	0.06	0.10	0.91	0.65	0.05	0.16	0.38	0.56	0.02	0.50
Other	-0.47	0.62	-0.03	0.44	-0.79	0.62	-0.04	0.20	-0.34	0.52	-0.02	0.51
Academic Status ^c												
Part Time					-0.38	0.52	-0.03	0.46	-0.53	0.44	-0.04	0.23
Program Year ^d												
BSW Senior					-1.20	0.68	-0.07	0.08	-1.26	0.57	-0.08	0.03
MSW 1st Year					-0.41	0.69	-0.03	0.56	-1.10	0.59	-0.07	0.06
MSW 2nd Year					-1.14	0.68	-0.08	0.09	-1.26	0.57	-0.09	0.03
MSW Adv. Standing					-1.10	0.74	-0.06	0.14	-1.25	0.63	-0.07	0.05
Percent Online ^e												
About 75%					3.83	1.73	0.15	0.03	3.06	1.45	0.12	0.04
100%					4.43	1.53	0.20	0.004	3.89	1.29	0.18	0.003
Synchronous Classes ^f												
Rarely					-0.07	0.79	-0.01	0.93	-0.95	0.67	-0.07	0.16
Occasionally					0.73	0.80	0.05	0.36	-0.86	0.69	-0.06	0.21
Frequently					0.82	0.87	0.05	0.34	-1.01	0.75	-0.06	0.18
Very Frequently					1.56	0.80	0.11	0.05	-0.09	0.69	-0.01	0.89
COVID-19 ^g												
(6) Healthy Behavior									0.76	0.16	0.14	<.001
(7) Unable to Focus									-0.76	0.16	-0.16	<.001
(9) More Determined									1.13	0.16	0.22	<.001
(10) Doubt Continue									-0.52	0.15	-0.12	0.001
(12) Support to Cope									0.53	0.20	0.10	0.01
(13) Faculty Foster									0.67	0.19	0.12	<.001
R ²		0.031				0.062				0.343		
F-Value		5.27***				3.38***				19.38***		

Note. ^a Reference group = Male. ^b Reference group = White. ^c Reference group = Full-time. ^d Reference group = BSW Junior. ^e Reference group = < 75%. ^f Reference group = Never. ^g The numbers refer to the items as they appear in Table 2. ****p*<.001

Online Teaching Pedagogy. Students identified various teaching strategies that they believed were helpful during emergency remote instruction. Their responses acknowledged positive strategies that faculty had been using, such as being available/flexible, as well as negative experiences, which often centered around a lack of timely communication, grading, and feedback. Students' recommendations corresponded with what we know are basic tenets of distance education, like timely response to emails and return of assignment grading with substantive feedback. The need for timely and substantive instructor feedback was mentioned as important by students, in order to improve their learning and completion of future assignments. Examples of students' positive experiences with faculty often centered on the element of academic support and included:

Many professors have already taken some steps to lighten the course load, while still keeping intact the fundamentals.

Stay supportive, all my professors have been very supportive, and I appreciate that. It makes doing schoolwork more bearable knowing that they are there to help.

I am feeling burned-out, but I feel as though the faculty has been doing everything they can to support me. They have been there for every question that I have had and fully understand how stressful it is for students right now and they are more than willing to help us and work through this time with us.

Student recommendations for improving online teaching pedagogy included:

Professors communicating more effectively and turning in our grades faster will help us know how we are doing on assignments.

Majority of my teachers have been slow at providing feedback on assignments, typically after the following assignment is due and I am unable to learn from my mistakes and make corrections.

Impact of COVID-19. Students' personal experiences with stress, burnout, and other struggles with their mental health amid COVID-19 were salient. Student responses identified strategies that faculty had used to support their wellness, as well as areas for increased emotional support, particularly around workload and mental health. Examples of positive experiences with faculty emotional support included:

One professor had us share favorite uplifting songs and created a playlist on Spotify that was shared with the class...that was a creative way to bring some lightness into our lives.

So far, my instructors have been very supportive and understanding of the varying levels of stress that my classmates and I have experienced.

Examples of student recommendations for improving faculty emotional support included:

If your students are opening up and explaining that they are not coping with mental health well you need to back off on the homework, be more understanding of deadlines, and even consider shortening classes. We are NOT coping.

I wish that it felt easier or less stigmatized to tell professors about mental health

issues affecting class work abilities. In the same way that a student might let their professor know that a broken arm or pneumonia might affect one's schoolwork, a student should be able to share their concerns about mental health affecting their schoolwork in a way that will not be judged or dismissed.

Transition of Teaching and Learning. The transition to emergency remote learning for students who had enrolled in a face-to-face program, as well as faculty that primarily taught in face-to-face courses, was abrupt and left little time for planning or preparation. However, students acknowledged positive experiences with transitioning to online learning, as exemplified by their comments:

Continue to offer online options. I work in a long-term healthcare facility so I shouldn't be coming onto campus.

I'm burned out from juggling too many things while trying to parent. And my professors are very kind... my kids jump into the screen while in a seminar, no one seems to mind because we're all in the same boat, but it's stressful for me. So I guess that's a 'me' problem.

Students acknowledged various challenges and corresponding recommendations or areas for faculty consideration. Examples include:

While we are students, we are also still parents, spouses, friends, employees, and human. There have been instances where I have enrolled in courses that were supposed to be in person, but the material was not adjusted to realistically fit an online course and schedule. When these adjustments don't happen, students get very stressed and overwhelmed and feel burnout.

It's hard to feel connected to a program that I started in-person now that I have been apart from my cohort for so long. I think if our advisors could make a phone call or email to each of us individually (maybe once a month) it might help to feel more connected...

It feels as though the curriculum was not adapted to fit an online schedule. I see how these projects would be beneficial in the classroom, but it just adds so much strain to complete, say a group presentation where we each have to record our voices individually and figure out how to attach them to the slides.

Affective Domains of Learning. COVID-19, community lockdowns, and social distancing requirements resulted in student displacement, social isolation, and loss of support. The need for increased support emerged in this theme as a focus on affective domains of learning, such as exploring one's values, self-identity, and sense of purpose. Students offered recommendations for increasing the connectivity between one's identity as a student and a larger experience of self as exemplified by the following exemplar quotes:

I think this is a function of not feeling fulfilled externally and somewhat internally given the state of the world and the lack of opportunities for the LGBTQ+ community while living back in my home state. So, I guess creating more intentional and meaningful ways to explore the areas that we are lacking in our

lives by connecting school to our identities.

I would offer a support group for students via Zoom to discuss struggles, because many people do not have supports who understand the complexities and depths of what we as students and professionals experience. Many students also work and have things going on with family, so an outlet would be helpful.

In addition, students offered suggestions and provided feedback regarding improvements that centered around affective learning that explored students' sense of self.

I understand the need for discussion posts but replying to other students is repetitive and honestly does nothing for me. I do not mind when it is to help us get to know one another, such as sharing personal stories.

Have check-ins that are not a survey just to ask about the coursework or the class but include check-in about how the student is doing.

Discussion

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on students' personal and academic lives. Many students worried about their finances and health, felt isolated from others and disconnected from the academic community, and were unable to focus on school. Yet more than half of the current sample also actively engaged in selfcare, felt more determined to graduate, and reported having beneficial supports that fostered their ability to cope and to learn. Experiences related to COVID-19 accounted for a significant proportion of variance in student exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy, above and beyond demographic and academic variables. However, only three of 14 items queried were significant across all three domains of burnout: inability to focus on schoolwork, doubt regarding the continuation of studies, and having faculty who continued to foster student learning in positive and meaningful ways. Notably, the average scores (based on student self-report) for the items assessing inability to focus and doubt regarding continuation of studies were the lowest scored. Thus, while some aspects of COVID were salient in students' lives (e.g., worry about health), they were not directly associated with student burnout. This, combined with differences in the predictive academic variables (e.g., full-time status and regular synchronous classes were associated with increased exhaustion and cynicism), support more targeted and specific approaches. Further, the results suggest a shift from a school-wide approach (i.e., equality) to teaching approaches that lean toward equity based on individual circumstances (Smith et al., 2017).

Qualitative analyses identified that faculty timeliness of communications and substantive assignment feedback, as well as being mindful of students' workload and challenges amid the pandemic were all critical to what students felt was helpful. Although many of those student concerns would not be unexpected, even outside of the pandemic, a notable exception was student desire for greater emphasis on affective learning. This student concern can address a contradiction between Smoyer and colleagues' (2020) findings on the value of synchronous online learning and our findings of an association between greater experiences of exhaustion and cynicism and synchronous classes attendance. The theme of "affective domains of learning" reconciles this contradiction.

Students were noted to recommend a greater learner-centered approach for synchronous course meetings that focuses on the affective domain of learning and humanistic education. “Humanistic education is therefore interested in educating the whole person—the intellectual and the emotional dimensions. It is most directly related to what is referred to as the “third force,” or humanistic psychology, and the “human potential movement” (Khatib et al., 2013, p. 45). In Maslow’s (1965) hierarchy of needs, “self-actualization” would be representative of learning outcomes that are sought in this approach. Students experience of burnout in emergency remote synchronous classes may represent a desire for greater affective-focused learning in synchronous classes, as opposed to solely a cognitive focus.

Further, students who engaged in healthy behaviors during the pandemic experienced higher levels of professional/academic efficacy. Previous research noted declines in health-promoting behaviors like exercise and a healthy diet among students and an increase in maladaptive coping strategies such as binge drinking and substance use, as well as increased risk of burnout during COVID-19 among students with poor physical health (Apgar & Cadmus, 2021; Lawrence et al., 2021; Reznik et al., 2021; Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021). Although social work students are often aware of the importance of self-care (which is endorsed by leading social work entities such as NASW and CSWE), they may place greater emphasis on attending to academic demands over self-care (Diebold et al., 2018). Thus, while it is important for faculty members to teach students about self-care, greater emphasis and support for *practicing* self-care are warranted. Various online resources, such as self-care starter kits, that are readily available can supplement these efforts (see University of Buffalo, 2023).

Resilience, and associated factors, as well as student age were significant considerations in students’ experiences of burnout (i.e., older students may be better able to manage the stress of the pandemic). Previous COVID-related research noted that younger age was associated with increased risk for poorer outcomes and increased burnout (Murat et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2021). As people age, they are more likely to have experienced life challenges and have greater insight and ability to face adversity (Rossi et al., 2021). In addition, students who had a sense of determination amid COVID-19 had lower levels of cynicism and higher levels of efficacy, in contrast to those with greater doubtfulness during the pandemic who had higher levels of exhaustion and lower efficacy. Reznik et al. (2021) noted that higher resilience among international social work students was associated with less fear of COVID-19, lower levels of depression and exhaustion, decreased loneliness and nervousness, as well as decreased anger during the pandemic. Similarly, in the present study, resilience directly contributed to lower levels of exhaustion and cynicism and to higher levels of efficacy; however, it did not moderate the relationship between students’ experiences related to COVID-19 and their level of burnout.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Student experiences with COVID-19 were assessed using a self-report at one point in time. As such, response bias and cross-sectional design present potential limitations. In addition, experiences with COVID were not assessed with a standardized measure; however, the development of the respective items was based on

teaching experience, the available literature, and several iterations of review. Qualitative analyses were conducted by one member of the research team. Although this can result in additional bias, the researchers examined and discussed the viability of codes and themes during the analyses. In addition, this study was conducted among students in a single school of social work. Despite a large sample size that encompassed students from across multiple campuses, the results may be influenced by unique school dynamics and culture. However, the shift to online learning during the pandemic was common across universities and likely presented similar experiences for students.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic struck with great uncertainty that led some social workers to question their judgment, knowledge, and competence (Afrouz, 2021). This study highlighted the negative and positive experiences associated with COVID-19 and the effects of these experiences on student wellbeing. Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us just how vital it is to understand student learning as a complex web of interconnected personal and academic factors. In addition, the pandemic has underlined the urgent need for teaching strategies that prioritize establishing meaningful relationships with students. As online learning has become a widespread alternative, and new pedagogical techniques are being developed, it is crucial for faculty to explore innovations that create personalized and engaging ways of fostering genuine connections among students, particularly in the virtual classroom.

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