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AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF MISSISSIPPI: FAMILY, CAREERS, AND MENTAL HEALTH

By

Hannah Grace Newbold

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

May 2021

Approved By

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Reader: Professor Marquita Smith

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the lives who forever changed in 2020 due to COVID-19.

To the families who lost loved members

To the front-line workers taking care of the sick.

To the students whose futures look different.

To the University administrators and professors as they endeavor to teach virtually.

To the small businesses who tried to survive.

To those with a story that wasn't told by anyone.

You are heard.

This has been a painful year.

But,

You've built a legacy to tell the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am incredibly grateful to the people who have encouraged me throughout all four years of my undergraduate career, but especially during the final year as I wrote my thesis. There are too many people to put on this page.

To the McLean Staff, including Dr. Albert Nylander, Laura Martin, and Dr. J.R. Love, thank you for the opportunity to learn about community and economic development. Being a part of the CEED Program has deepened my connection to Mississippi and is one of the reasons why I want to stay here after graduation. Thank you.

To the Mississippi SBDC State Office team, including Sharon Nichols, Judy Forester, Katie Mink, Janet Dickens, Michelle Thompson, Frances Hays, Precious Thompson, and Sarah Cervantes, thank you for taking a chance on me as a junior in college. Thank you for believing in me and for entrusting me with the opportunity to work alongside you.

To my roommates, thank you for the constant encouragement and support as I wrote my thesis. Our Friday night girls' movie nights have been one of the highlights of my college experience. Thank you for sharing that with me. Those memories are cherished and won't be forgotten. Sisterhood forever.

To my parents, Craig and Michelle Newbold, thank you for your support during my college years. Even though spring 2020 was difficult, I appreciate your wisdom, support and kindness to me, as I stayed in Oxford and didn't return home. Thank you for trusting me in that time as I made decisions.

To my thesis readers, Cynthia Joyce and Marquita Smith, thank you for making me ask deep questions and for pushing my thesis to really look at the changes affecting my peers.

To my thesis advisor, Dr. Mark Dolan, thank you. Your courses have both challenged and enriched my undergraduate education. Thank you for not only advising my thesis, but for also being a friend in the midst of 2020. You have impacted me and that won't be forgotten.

ABSTRACT

HANNAH GRACE NEWBOLD: An Analysis of the Effects of COVID-19 on Students at the University of Mississippi

This study analyzes the effects of COVID-19 on students at the University of Mississippi. For students, COVID-19 changed the landscape of education, with classes and jobs going online. Students who graduated in May 2020 entered a poor job market and many ended up going to graduate school instead of finding a job. Access to medical and professional help was limited at the very beginning, with offices not taking patients or moving appointments to virtual only. This would require that each student needing help had to have access to quality internet service, which wasn't always guaranteed, thus producing additional challenges.

These chapters, including a robust literature review of relevant sources, as well as a personal essay, consist further of interviews with students and mental health counselors conducted over the span of several months. These interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom. The interviews were conducted with individuals who traveled in similar social circles as me. These previously existing relationships allowed the conversation to go deeper than before and allowed new levels of relationship. Emerging from these conversations were six overlapping themes: the importance of family, the need for health over career, the challenge of isolation, struggles with virtual education, assessing mental health, and facing the reality of a bright future not promised. Their revelations of deep academic challenges and fears about the future amid stories of devastating personal loss, produces a striking and complex picture of emerging strength.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2020, my entire world stopped. It practically paused for four months. I saw friends lose family members and future employment opportunities to COVID-19. They questioned and changed their lives to adjust to the pandemic. I also watched a mental health crisis emerge for students at the University of Mississippi. This thesis tells their stories, which are filled with hope, fear and ambiguities, and connected by a virus. My research started in the summer of 2020, several months after the United States began first grappling with the pandemic. It began with observations, anecdotal stories, in some instances impressions of college friends struggling through a difficult time. I hadn't planned my thesis to focus on issues related to my peers. My plan was to research access to healthcare and to explore health inequities in Marks, Mississippi. The pandemic forced me to pivot, and so I opted to tell the stories of my peers at the University of Mississippi, in an attempt to isolate and distill their challenges as their social interaction and careers halted.

My peers told some of these stories with tears in their eyes, anguished and frustrated about what had happened to their family, careers, and dreams. There were moments when I wanted to cry too, feeling their pain, and I continue to see pieces of my own story within each of their stories. During COVID-19, people weren't going out and interacting with others. My interviews were peers and counselors that I was connected to. I chose my interviews because of my personal relationship with them. They revealed their stories to me in ways that were unexpected and because of this, our conversations went to new levels of friendship. I wanted to

honor students who lost loved ones and couldn't honor them at the gravesite, to tell the stories of students who had given it all to their work and education in their college years hoping they'd find a job and then couldn't after graduation. I also endeavored to tell the hardships and the struggles of depression and anxiety so many students faced. A part of me can be seen throughout all these stories. They were hard to write and I want to thank each and every one of the individuals who had the courage to talk about what happened to them just a few months into 2020.

Six overarching themes from the interviews emerge and echo my personal experience: importance of family, health over career, the challenges of isolation, struggles with virtual education, increasing depression and anxiety, and the future not promised. Following this introduction is a personal essay telling my own story from 2020, aspects of which are in turn reflected in the interview stories, which then follow. These stories center around family concerns, changing careers, and health challenges for students at the University of Mississippi. Each interview tells a different story, and is about a different person, but all express deep anguish and frustration around the pandemic.

CHAPTER ONE: PERSONAL ESSAY

January 2020 started as a year full of promise and excitement as a student in our school's Integrated Marketing and Communication track and with my focus, which is on public relations. I was finishing a biology minor and was hoping to work in hospital communications that summer. I'd applied for internships at IVX Health in Nashville, St. Jude Children's Hospital and FedEx in Memphis, Tennessee and was anxiously waiting to hear from them.

I was planning the annual TEDxUniversityofMississippi event to be held in late February. TEDxUniversityofMississippi is an annual event with speakers sharing ideas worth spreading. Our speakers in 2020 came from around the world to the Ford Center to share ideas about cardiovascular health, reading, measuring poverty, and ageism, and many more ideas. I was also looking forward to a work trip to Biloxi for a strategic planning session. I ended up being able to travel to Biloxi in mid-February for the Mississippi Small Business Development Center statewide meeting in which we did disaster training and strategic planning to prepare for the coming year. Looking back, the disaster training was crucial because few could anticipate what lurked in the pipeline.

That trip was just two weeks away from TEDxUniversityofMississippi – an event I'd been planning for almost a year. When I returned from Biloxi, I became sick. I'd been keeping up with the news of COVID-19 since December and was sure that things would get bad quickly, because I was convinced that the virus would spread quickly and be extremely dangerous. However, I didn't expect to get sick myself. Going to the doctor, they informed me that I'd tested negative

for the flu, but the doctors gave me flu medicine and assured me I didn't have COVID. They blamed the negative test on the timing, saying I had come too late to test positive for the flu. My roommate at the time was immunocompromised, and I was worried that I'd make her ill, so I left my apartment for the week, worried I'd caught the virus. They didn't have the ability to test me for COVID-19, but the physician assured me I didn't have it.

I packed up my bags and left to stay at my boyfriend's family house just outside of Oxford. I sent emails for TEDx from their guest room, where I slept and rested until I could return to classes. Strangely enough, I didn't have many of the typical flu symptoms, only a slight cough, fever, and sore throat, also symptoms of COVID-19. I had no congestion at all. With TEDxUniversityofMississippi coming up shortly, the team told me to rest until the day of dress rehearsals to make sure I was better and would be able to come to the event. Resting is not in my nature, but I listened.

Over 500 people attended the event in person. Our speakers, Dr. Warrick Bishop from Australia, Ruth Sherman from Pennsylvania, and six other speakers, shared ideas that were diverse, but all centered around the idea of continuing forward and progress. The ideas included how poverty gets measured, the impact of reading on empathy, and improving cardiovascular health. My fellow students went away for spring break the following week, but I had decided to stay in Oxford over the break to catch up on sleep from midterms and planning TEDxUniversityofMississippi. I was still exhausted from being sick. With COVID-19 cases popping up all over the coast and the world, I called my TEDx advisor, Professor Kate Hooper, to check in with her post-event and to see what she knew about our classes. She was a lecturer for the Rhetoric and Writing department and a former teacher of mine. She told me what I'd

already suspected: classes would most likely be going online. Within the next 72 hours, my life changed dramatically.

My long-term career goal was to work in crisis communications in healthcare. I'd worked at the University of Mississippi Medical Center the summer before and was aiming to work at St. Jude in Memphis that summer. Up to this point, my experience was mostly in social media and journalistic writing, but I knew that my goal was to work in media relations and community relations. I'd also always had a passion for music – playing in two separate worship bands throughout college. I've played piano and sung since I was five, but I don't have access to a piano unless I was at church or on campus in the music building. My immediate access to music stopped immediately, with worship services either being cancelled or moved to virtual with limited music. I didn't have anywhere to play. I started going on drives down Highway 6 just to sing and listen to music. Music brought me comfort when I was by myself.

All my classes went online following spring break, and I went from being gone from my apartment from sunrise until dark every day to being at home all day, every day, with as many as eight Zoom calls at my desk which was two feet away from my bed. I missed being around people. I missed face-to-face conversations and drinking coffee on study dates with friends. I started going walking every day to just get outside and breathe fresh air. I tried to grow some herbs and flowers on my little patio, but they did not grow well. Between Zoom calls, I would work on homework or paint on my patio., redoing an old piece of furniture given to me by a friend during quarantine on my back porch.

My job became remote, working on social media and newsletters for Mississippi Small Business Development Center, my in-person classes moved to Zoom and my blackboard notifications and inbox exploded. My roommates left me to go home. I decided to stay in Oxford

because the COVID cases were very bad in my home county of Fulton, Georgia. My parents told me that I would be safer to stay at school and that I'd be at a higher risk if I returned home.

The first couple of weeks of "quarantine" were horrific. I was isolated and alone. My anxiety had skyrocketed, and I was continually stressed. It seemed like my to-do list never ended and a day was never quite done. I would get emails in the middle of the night and wake up to read them. I was always afraid that I was missing an assignment or that I had fallen behind in coursework. I was worried for my siblings who were considered essential workers at a restaurant in Georgia. I was scared for my parent's and grandparent's health and I checked in with my mother frequently to make sure all was okay at home.

In late April, I heard from St. Jude in Memphis that they were no longer planning to have summer internships. The news broke me. That internship had been my dream job. I knew it wouldn't have been in person, but I'd been praying it would be remote. I had worked several other jobs to build my resume, at the University of Mississippi Medical Center and the Mississippi Small Business Development Center, to qualify me for that position with St. Jude. Waiting to apply until I acquired the needed skills, I suddenly had no opportunity there. My dream job was gone, I was alone in my apartment, and my classes were online.

Panicking about what my summer plans were, I started searching for anything I could do during the summer. Dr. J.R. Love at the McLean Institute was instrumental in orchestrating a position for me with the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau. It took a few months to get through the government security check, but I finally got through background and received my work computer in late July. The next few weeks were spent writing tweets, and op-eds, doing research within the National Reserve, while meeting with people virtually in Washington D.C. In

hindsight, this was the job I needed. It taught me about policy and government writing. It trained me further in business communication and how to both research and write proficiently.

My career goals shifted at this point. I learned skills that weren't in crisis communication or public relations. I could hit a deadline within an hour's notice, writing tweets for the Women's Bureau events and writing statements for stakeholder newsletters. I had the opportunity to write a tweet for Former First Lady Melania Trump and drafted a few opinion editorials for Fox Business. I discovered a passion for business communication and a personal goal to improve employment opportunities for American women.

COVID-19 was both a blessing and curse for me. I learned that nothing is promised in my future. I can't count on having a job in May 2021 when I graduate, especially if the economy continues to decline. However, I learned to bake bagels in quarantine, and I started writing every day. I took long walks on the South Campus Rail Trail with a dear friend to get outside and breathe the fresh air. I changed my diet completely, going gluten and dairy free, and got healthier. It wasn't an easy adjustment, but I definitely learned to trust Christ through it.

The pandemic also brought me closer to some of my now dearest friends. I've made some of the greatest friendships of my college career while sitting at home and working remotely over the summer. My career path also changed. My dream is still to work in healthcare, but I have gained an interest in healthcare policy or healthcare information because of COVID-19. I am also interested in business communication and economic development, particularly in rural areas. I believe that everyone should have access to information about public health and should be aware of current public health policy. There should be better education in schools about healthcare and there should be more information available to the public about health recommendations and safety measures.

I don't know what my future career holds, but I've learned the importance of keeping family and friends close. My mom was in the hospital in January of 2021 with two blood clots in her legs. Within minutes of learning what was going on at home, I had my bags packed, ready to drive to home to Atlanta to be with my family.

My goal for my thesis is to share the other stories of the students whose lives changed forever this past spring. For many, their emotional and mental health has deteriorated, or their career looks different than they thought it would. Like myself, many have realized the importance of family and the lack of importance a "career" holds on one's future.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores sources relevant to labor market challenges affecting college students trying to find a job, as well as sources discussing changes in higher education and how students perceive digital learning. College students in particular faced challenges to mental health, and isolation from peers and family caused depression and anxiety to rise. Substance abuse also rose for college students, with binge drinking and drug use ultimately causing further risk from the virus. With digital classes and limited physical activity, internet addiction rose quickly. Several of the sources discussed here serve to illuminate these and other social changes impacting college students, especially those nearing graduation.

Grief and Family dynamics

Because of COVID-19, families were forced to adapt to new grieving circumstances and a changing family dynamic. Nearly one-third of adults reported that their families could not pay the rent, mortgage, or utility bills, were food insecure, or went without medical care because of the cost. Adults in particular were very worried about being able to work enough to pay bills and pay off debts. More than one-quarter of adults surveyed were worried about paying for housing, utility, and medical costs and having enough food to eat (Karpman, et al., 2020). Not only did the economics of COVID-19 affect families, but deep loss and grief also challenged families. For each person that passes away from COVID-19, nine family members are affected. This loss may affect educational achievement, marriage, and cause mental health and physical health to worsen (Graham, 2020).

The lockdowns were hard for families, especially for older adults. However, the impact on college students has yet to be fully explored. In particular, families were unable to say

goodbye to loved ones or were not able to easily communicate with each other. On average, five to ten percent of bereaved family members used to have a trauma response after a loss in the family, but this number has grown dramatically to about forty percent (Graham, 2020).

For families, there were many stressors that accompany the handling of death. Stressors for families include continual social isolation, financial and future uncertainty, lack of routine, and the loss of face-to-face mourning rituals that often would have provided support. In a way, bereaved individuals have become the secondary victims of COVID-19. They face “helplessness, horror, anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, and regret,” (Graham, 2020).

Remote Classes and Upended Job Markets

According to a study at Arizona State University, COVID-19 had negative effects on students’ participation in the labor market and on the students’ expectations of the labor market (Aucejo, et. al., 2020). Students began to change their academic concentrations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty percent of bachelor and associate degree students will change their major in their first three years of higher education enrollment (Fox, 2020). In May of 2020, one in five students were unsure of their plans to re-enroll in college education (Svrluga, 2020). For graduating students, the work had just begun with finding a job following their virtual graduation.

Graduates in 2020 would have a difficult time finding a job following graduation. Approximately four million 2020 graduates entered the worst job market since the Great Depression. Not only that, but their earnings and career opportunities will be impacted for more than a decade (Golodryga, 2020). In a survey of 1,000 students, 71% believe that the pandemic will affect their job opportunities following graduation. Not only that, but current students found difficulty in finding a job at all - even just a summer internship. Due to the pandemic, 26%

percent of United States graduates reported having an internship cancelled in 2020. Another 27% percent dropped all plans of finding an internship in the midst of the pandemic (Fain, 2020). With the job market at a low, unemployment skyrocketed, leaving many students with few options.

In January 2021, the unemployment rate for young people aged 16 to 24 was around 11%. Forty million Americans filed for unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 27% of college seniors in the last decade have landed a good job following graduation. 43% started their career in a job that didn't require a college degree. Students no longer feel the need to move immediately following their graduation, because many will be working remotely from home (Flynn, 2020). For those still in school, higher education changed dramatically.

In higher education, courses turned digital and classes were adjusted to fit social distancing measures, following the Center for Disease Control guidelines. Adjusting to COVID-19 in higher education included adding health courses to the curriculum, strengthening health policies, creating online mental health services and providing training for teachers for online teaching (Toquero, 2020). Universities transitioned to distance learning, focusing on placing content in digital formats, but not on teaching or delivery of content (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Students worked remotely, sometimes with little internet access. During online learning, approximately 94% accessed their courses using their cellular phone, and 75% percent used a laptop. Students would watch television, read books and play video games during their free time (Pan, 2020). Curriculum became "responsive to the changing needs of the times" (Toquero, 2020). As courses continue to be virtual, the demand for access to zoom continues to increase (Soni, 2020). Most students were okay with digital learning but were not as successful as they could have been had classes been taught in person.

With courses moving online, technical support and student support were critical. A study showed that most students were content with support from online learning staff, although deficient computer skills and higher workloads prevented students from having improved performance. (Aristovnik, 2020). For context, approximately 264 million children were not in school during the shutdown started in March. Digital learning was at one point considered to be more informal, but now it is utilized everywhere in education (Mishra, et. al., 2020).

With digital learning taking over higher education, students and educators were forced to adapt. One study looked at the willingness of students to learn from digital sources and found that 82% were willing to learn digitally. Research in the Netherlands revealed that exam grades had a learning loss of three percentile points following an eight-week shut down. For first-generation college students, this learning loss was up to 55% greater for students. (Engzell, et. al., 2020). Students did remain concerned about career opportunities (Aristovnik, 2020). Not only were students worried about their academic and professional careers, but many were concerned about health and health care once they returned to their campus.

Mental and Physical Health Impacts

Students physically returning to campus in Fall of 2020 were worried about their medical care on campus. On campuses, health officials realized there was a lack of personal protective equipment and supplies to care for students' health. Appointments were then shifted to telemedicine and drop in doctor visits were refused (Abelson, et. al., 2020). "Poor psychological condition can lead to a decreased immunity for students, causing physiological mechanisms to become out of balance" (Arribathi, et. al., 2020). Their mental health concerns, which could be caused by loneliness, anxiety or depression, could end up causing physical harm.

In fact, students not only had a challenging time with their physical health, but they also had a harder time managing their mental health as well. Students were asked to stay at home in March of 2020. Their staying at home increased the risk of a depressed mood (Wang, et. al, 2020). Interestingly enough, postgraduates had a lower risk of anxiety and depression symptoms than undergraduates (Wang, et. al., 2020).

Fourteen different colleges and universities collaborated on a study of mental health and stressors for college students in the midst of the pandemic. The study learned that 60% of students found it harder to access mental health care and two-thirds of students reported financial stress increased (Martinez, 2020). A study done at the medical college in Changzhi found that living in urban areas, family income stability and living with parents were protective factors for anxiety. Delayed academics were positively correlated with anxiety (Cao, et. al., 2020). Out of a pool of 195 students in the United States, 71% of students experienced increased stress and anxiety due to COVID-19. “Stressors included fear and worry about loved ones, difficulty concentrating, sleep pattern disruptions, decreased social interactions, and concerns about academic performance,” (Son, et. al., 2020). Without access to mental health care, students spiraled into depression and anxiety.

Not only were students concerned about their futures, but they worried about the length of the pandemic. Sixty-five percent of students were very concerned about the length of the pandemic and 41% of students had depression in March and May compared with 36% in the Fall of 2019 (June, 2020). Another study found that one in five students say their mental health has worsened due to the pandemic (Hartocollis, 2020). Another concern for mental health professionals when considering student impact was suicide.

One in four people aged eighteen through twenty-four have seriously considered suicide. Students in particular are at low risk for COVID-19 but are at much higher risk for suicide (Dennon, 2020). A study done with, over 69,000 university students found that 11% had suicidal thoughts, 22% had severe distress, and 16% had severe depression. Almost 28% had a high level of anxiety (Graminga, 2020).

One in five college students had a diagnosable mental disorder in the midst of the pandemic (Zhai and Du, 2020). Surprisingly, students with a pre-existing mental health concern had similar or improved mental health following the shutdown. Students without pre-existing mental health concerns had a worsened mental health following the shutdown (Hamza, et. al., 2020). Mental health concerns also include psychological distress, an emotional state that can lead to depression and anxiety.

Stress can also often lead to psychological distress. Another study done with health profession students showed that almost twenty-seven percent of participants were experiencing psychological distress. About 11% of participants met the criteria for an acute stress reaction (Wang, et. al., 2020). University students continue to be a vulnerable population when discussing mental health challenges. Students living with parents often had lower rates of anxiety, while rural living or lower income areas increased anxiety for students (Husky, et. al, 2020). Female students, non-Hispanic or Asian students, students in fair or poor health, relatively below average family income or knew someone impacted by COVID-19, were much more likely to experience higher levels of psychological distress (Browning, et. al., 2020).

Young adult participants in an additional study reported low levels of living space, activity, social contact and alcohol. The young reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and

uncertainty than older participants (Glowacz and Schmidts, 2020). Students showed great resolve by continuing in online classes, while protecting themselves and others from the virus.

Addiction to substances increased during the pandemic. Binge drinking rose from 24% to 38% (June, 2020). In another study, 31% of college students report symptoms of alcohol abuse. Individuals using drugs that weaken the lungs could be more vulnerable to the virus (Marston, 2020). Alcohol abuse increased dramatically as campuses closed for the semester. Higher levels of psychological distress, led to higher levels of alcohol abuse (Lechner, et. al., 2020). With many students isolated, substance abuse would be hard for health professionals to combat.

Addiction

Social isolation is connected to poor physical and mental well-being. Depression worsens when social support is lacking (Saltzman, et. al., 2020). Moreover, addiction to social media can be caused by harassment, depression or anxiety. A social media study using the Likert scale found that 49% of respondents indicated loneliness above a fifty. Eighty percent experienced depression like symptoms. Out of 2000 students, 80% said they are experiencing anxiety because of it (Hartocollis, 2020). Students at 14 Spanish universities showed a high level of social media consumption and high levels of addiction. Social media addiction can be the result of depression, harassment, or anxiety (Saltzman, et. al., 2020) Another study done in March of 2020 on 1060 students from a junior high school found that internet addiction was over 24% at the time (Lin, 2020).

Five hundred students were surveyed using the Chen Internet Addiction Scale. Denial and mental disengagement were positively associated with internet addiction. Restraint was negatively associated with internet addiction (Chou, et. al., 2015).

The sources discussed above, considered together, form a picture of the challenges college students faced during the pandemic. The challenges included isolation, addiction, mental health, concern for family, and career challenges. Following this are interviews of college students as they address personal challenges throughout the pandemic.

*“We couldn’t go see him in the hospital or anything.
He really didn’t want to go into the hospital because of the coronavirus. He was really scared.”
Kaitlyn Traylor*

CHAPTER THREE: PHYSICAL DISTANCE, GRIEF AND CHANGING DYNAMICS

Typically, students are at lower risk for complications from the virus.¹ Therefore, they may have not been concerned for their own health but were concerned for the wellbeing of their family. Students who lost family members (even members that did not pass from the virus itself), were forced to grieve in unforeseen circumstances depending on their state's regulations for gatherings and for funerals. Some were unable to attend a funeral due to these regulations or felt like the funeral was inadequate in paying respect to their loved one.

In spring of 2020, many students' classes went virtual following spring break. Some students went home to their families, but some didn't, staying in their college town to take classes virtually. For those that didn't, they were often concerned about spreading the virus to family or were worried about traveling. With the virus affecting many, some of the University students became ill with the virus itself or had family members become ill.

Physically Distant from Family

For Maggie Smith, spring break of 2020 looked like a week off of school with friends. Maggie Smith was with her roommate in Charleston, South Carolina over spring break in March

¹ Dennon, A. (2020, November 03). Update on the College Student Mental Health Crisis: BestColleges. Retrieved January 18, 2021, from <https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/mental-health-in-college-students-during-covid-19-mental-health-crisis>

2020. They got the email that classes were going online two days before their break ended. On their way out of Charleston, they went to a Food Lion and got a whole bunch of groceries and toilet paper. Smith stayed in Oxford when all the classes went online and stayed for a week after finals ended.

She moved back home to Nashville in May and stayed there from the second half of May until a week before school started in Fall 2020. “It was absolutely miserable,” said Smith. “Originally, my boyfriend and I were both going to get to study abroad in Cork, Ireland. I was on scholarship and everything. It got cancelled, so I lived with my parents instead of in Cork. It was really sad.”²

She was planning to learn intensive Greek over the summer in Ireland, but she ended up staying at home with her family in Nashville. That wasn’t Smith’s plan, and the dynamic was strange for her. Smith’s uncle contracted COVID-19. Her uncle had pre-existing conditions and was trying to get evaluated for a transplant. He got COVID and was put on hospice. Smith had another friend from high school whose father contracted COVID.

“My boyfriend has more health anxiety than I do,” said Smith. “He would get really spooked. I was also really spooked. It was both of us sitting in our apartment being spooked. I lived in an apartment with no yard space. There were so many people on the trails that we didn’t want to go walk around.” Smith and her boyfriend studied together while in Oxford. They

² Fain, P. (2020, November 11). More urgency about creating career exploration options for college students. Retrieved January 18, 2021, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/11/11/more-urgency-about-creating-career-exploration-options-college-students>

cooked a lot, played board games, and watched Netflix to stay sane over quarantine. They would occasionally go to the park when it was less crowded.

Smith mentioned that she was extremely stir crazy and that she'd struggled to keep up in online classes, missing assignments and struggling to keep up with her assignments. A double major in Classics and German, Smith was planning to attend graduate school, until a job offer materialized. This is also a trend, the deferring of work for grad school. She had thought about working as a professor but now isn't totally sure what she wants to do.

Smith was concerned both for her family and herself in March because there was little information, and all the symptoms were the same as having a common cold. "I'm asthmatic, and I have pretty moderate asthma. It's not mild," said Smith. "I was really nervous about that, because it's mainly a respiratory illness. What am I going to do if I get COVID pneumonia? I'm still nervous about it, but not as much."

Smith said she was less nervous about it now as more and more college students contracted COVID and recovered safely, including asthmatics. "And now I'm not home with my family so I don't have to worry about giving it to my family," said Smith. "I was really stressed about the possible asthma complications."

She also expressed concern for her elderly relatives in Nashville, worried she'd contract COVID from a friend who was asymptomatic and bring the virus home accidentally. "My dad's parents live in Nashville too," said Smith. "I'm really close to my grandparents, so I was really nervous. That's still really stressful. I'm not as paranoid about it anymore."

For Smith, going home was stressful due to fear of spreading the virus to her older family members. She chose to spend the quarantine weeks with her boyfriend, avoiding the virus and

public places. Students longed to visit sick family members but were not allowed due to travel bans and concerns of spreading the virus.

Paul Robinson, a junior Integrated Marketing Communications major, was working in student housing at the time of the lockdown. His family lives in Liberty, Mississippi, a small town four hours south of Oxford on the coast. He decided to stay in Oxford at the beginning of spring break in 2020 to rest. Paul worked in the Residential College South as a community assistant. When the school shut down, none of his friends were in the building so he was essentially alone in the dormitory. At the time, Robinson also did not have a car, so he couldn't travel very easily to get home.

"Everything is online, so for me it was just a moment of being alone," Robinson said. He spent days by himself in his dorm room over the next two months before school ended, watching Netflix and struggling through a microeconomics course, which had turned into an online class.³ For Robinson, microeconomics had been challenging in person, but it became even more difficult online.

"I have PTSD from the emails. When COVID started, it was email after email. Professors were trying to learn how to use zoom. I wasn't getting a break. I felt like it was always work," said Robinson.

Robinson's father stayed connected with him over the phone and offered to send his sister to retrieve him from campus, if he'd wanted. His father was concerned for Robinson's safety by himself in the dorm. But for Robinson, isolation was okay. A naturally shy individual, he was

³ Mishra, L., Gupta, T., & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 1, 100012.

comfortable alone. Before COVID happened, during his junior year, he'd started coming out of his shell and meeting more people on campus. But COVID made him less social, with a lot of time to think in isolation. "Thinking leads to overthinking. I was overthinking a lot of stuff," said Robinson.⁴ He was particularly concerned about when the pandemic would be over and about his courses, which had moved online.

Somewhat concerned for his family, he knew they were wearing masks and taking care of themselves during the pandemic. His aunt did end up contracting COVID-19, but it was a mild case and she recovered.

Going home in the summertime, he discovered a strange transition period in Liberty, Mississippi. Up until this point, Robinson had been used to wearing a mask in Oxford, Mississippi with stores and restaurants requiring a mask for entry and the local mayor mandating it. But in Liberty, Mississippi, his hometown, this wasn't required until the summertime. At the beginning of his time at home, he realized that "nobody was wearing masks."

Robinson's aunt passed away in August from a stroke. His aunt was like a second mother to him, living right across the street. "We had the funeral at a gravesite and couldn't have a lot of people there." Robinson said that in this moment he realized, "this is how things are going to be." For Robinson, this was a pivotal point in the midst of the pandemic, as he recognized the loss deep within his family as they strove to move forward together.

Robinson was originally planning to be in New York for a summer internship, but when the shutdown began, all the internships were cancelled. He'd applied to internships at

⁴ Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., & Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry research*, 112934.

iHeartRadio, HBO, and several other fashion websites and blogs. Robinson ended up spending the summer at home with his family. With his dream of working in the entertainment industry, he plans to go to grad school at University of Southern California and received a full ride scholarship to attend in Fall 2021.

Grief Over Loss of Family

Anja Diercks, an Oxford native, was in Atlanta during March receiving her German citizenship. She had extended family in Germany and was getting her citizenship so she could go visit her family over the summer for three months. During this time period, a cruise ship had come down with the virus and had unloaded on the coast, sending everyone on the ship on a flight to Atlanta.

Diercks ended up with a fever and had to quarantine in Atlanta for two weeks. “My grandmother actually did get SARS, she didn’t get COVID-19, but she got a coronavirus.” Diercks’ grandmother was in Germany so she couldn’t go visit due to Europe’s travel ban. “She was halfway around the world and we couldn’t visit her,” said Diercks. “We couldn’t say goodbye or anything when she ended up passing away. That was really hard because we didn’t get to say goodbye. We didn’t get to go to a funeral.”

Diercks ended up losing both her grandmothers over the summer. Although she wasn’t able to visit her grandmother in Germany, she was able to visit with her other grandmother who lives on the Mississippi coast. She was able to visit with her the week before she passed. “I’m really glad that we got to go down there, but originally I’d been planning to see my German grandmother whenever I was over there,” said Diercks.

Diercks was orchestrating the travel plans and trying to find a way to get to her grandmother's house in Germany over the summer. She hadn't told her grandmother of her plans to visit her. "I didn't have a way to rent a car and it just seemed very unlikely. I hadn't even mentioned that I was coming over, because I didn't want to disappoint her by saying that I couldn't come see her," said Diercks. "She found out that I was coming over anyway. She was really upset with me, that I hadn't figured it out. I didn't get to tell her I'd fixed the problem."

Communication with family seemed to increase during this season of life for students separated from family. Family has become more valued and appreciated especially while separated. Diercks said that she felt compelled to communicate more with family and make sure they are okay, having two twin brothers and parents in Oxford.

Diercks lost a close friend to suicide over the summer as well. Dealing with multiple friends and family passing away would be challenging for anyone. But Diercks was also a senior in college and all her courses moved online. Last spring, Diercks was in several upper-level science classes and some of her professors struggled to move online. One of her classes (originally a fifty-minute class period), became a two-hour lecture during each class period. She also was taking an intensive MCAT study class with some close friends. Diercks mentioned really missing the in-person communication she'd had with her friends from that course.

"There were a few friends though, that I only saw because I met them in person consistently and we had our little ritual," said Diercks. "We were all in a test prep class for the MCAT and we would meet to go out for ice cream after our group sessions and hang out for a few minutes."

A biochemistry major, Diercks debated on taking a gap year after graduation, but ended up taking her MCAT in September and filling out a medical school application.⁵ She's also been writing her thesis on health insurance and how it impacts undocumented immigrants. Graduating in December 2020, she plans to attend medical school. Her family is a tight knit unit, and she spent her college career living at home with family in Oxford, Mississippi.

For students, grieving over loss of their close family members was a challenge in the midst of COVID-19. For Kaitlyn Traylor, a Lafayette County native, had to grieve the loss of both family and her summer job in the spring. Traylor found out about coronavirus right after spring break. "I really didn't think it was going to be much of a big deal," said Traylor. "After spring break was over, my grandfather was in the hospital. He'd been in the hospital a bunch of times before, so I wasn't very worried."

A week after he was admitted to the hospital, he passed away and was brought back because of his pacemaker. "We couldn't go see him in the hospital or anything," said Traylor. "He really didn't want to go into the hospital because of the coronavirus. He was really scared."

Her grandfather returned home from the hospital on hospice. Traylor has a large family, and they were able to spend lots of time with her grandfather together before he passed. Traylor's grandfather was a veteran and had a lot of things he wanted within his funeral service, which he couldn't have. He had 13 brothers and sisters.

"We had to tell some people that they couldn't come," said Traylor. "We didn't get the military salute that he had wanted. We didn't get to go meet out at the grave. That made me

⁵ Svrluga, S. (2020, May 18). With colleges shuttered, more students consider gap years. But those may be disrupted, too. Retrieved January 17, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/05/13/gap-years-college-covid/>

really mad.” Traylor struggled to wrap her mind around the grieving of her grandfather and felt like she didn’t have time to grieve her grandfather’s death. Every summer, Traylor worked at Central Hill Baptist Retreat as a camp counselor. She planned her annual budget around working at the camp to pay for rent and food. After her grandfather passed, she stayed with her grandmother, who had never been alone, to keep her company.

“I was kind of wondering what was going to happen to camp,” said Traylor. “I thought, there’s no way. We’ll be able to wear a mask and we always keep everything clean. We’ll just up that some.” Eventually, the state of Mississippi made the decision to shut down all summer camps. This decision affected Traylor as she was preparing for school in the fall. “I broke down in tears, because not only was I stressed about the financial need that I was going to be struggling with, but I love that job. It was really hard to see that stripped away from me.”

Traylor was eventually able to find a job for the summer but went home to live with her parents in Abbeville, Mississippi to save money for expenses and rent. She went home in an effort to not have to depend on family to cover her expenses that coming fall. A secondary English education major, she was supposed to go study abroad. She believes that her study abroad trip will be most likely cancelled due to COVID-19. To emotionally handle the stress of the current situation, she started reading and painting. She made little watercolor paintings over quarantine with the intention of mailing them to her friends.

Changing Family Dynamics

Kate Spiers, a junior dual degree student in Math Education and Education, had a different experience with COVID-19, returning home for several months and not leaving her family. The first she heard about COVID was in January. She was visiting a friend who had just gotten back from traveling to China. He said that they weren’t able to get together with other

friends at Mississippi State, because they were worried they might have the coronavirus. Spring break rolled around, and Kate went home a few days early to spend time with her mom over spring break. She surprised her mother in Picayune, Mississippi late Wednesday night before the first week of spring break. She hadn't been home at all that semester. That next Thursday, she was sitting at a Barbeque restaurant with her grandparent's neighbors.

Sitting at the table, they were talking about the possibility of school not going back into session. They were suspicious that Ole Miss was also about to shut down. During that lunch, she got the email that school would be having an extended spring break for one week and then transitioning to online classes. Kate lived in a dorm, so the next day her mom and her drove up to Oxford to get over half of her belongings out of the dorm.

“It was a really really strange time, but thankfully I was already at home,” said Spiers. “I think that was easier, that I was already at home and I was with my mom because she had taken off.”

Kate and her mother had planned to spend some time together while she was at home for spring break, but now Kate was home indefinitely. It worked out that Kate was able to travel up to Oxford because her mother was also off work at the same time. Spiers didn't have an option to stay in Oxford. Once the dorms had closed, she didn't have a place to stay. So, she returned to Picayune to finish a semester of classes online at home with her family.

“My freshman year wasn't great, the beginning of my sophomore year was a bit better, but by the second semester of my sophomore year it was great,” said Spiers. “And it was cut off right in the middle. I was kind of in the limbo, where I was back in Picayune, but my friends weren't really taking COVID seriously there. And I wanted to take it seriously.”

Kate sat around the kitchen table with her brother and her mom watching former President Donald Trump address the nation. They would then switch to the Mississippi governor, Tate Reeves to listen to the mandates in Mississippi. Spier's brother was 22 at this point, having graduated in December 2019. All of her family was used to living on their own. But within three months, they were all living together again.

"It was weird, it was really weird," said Spiers. "My brother and I had to share a bathroom and it was just a family dynamic that we hadn't been used to."

During this time at home, Spiers mentioned that she wasn't really lonely because she had her family. But over the summer, Spiers got lonely. She started hanging out with friends more and more but still felt lonely. Spiers attributes the loneliness to past feelings of isolation from quarantine that were just then coming to the surface.

"It could have been because I was in my house for so long," said Spiers. "It really affected my schoolwork in the second last half of the semester. I've built up an aversion to my desk. I hated it. I would have to find other places to sit and do work because even when I was in school, I never did work at home." Spiers plans to teach high school math when she graduates in May 2022. She looks ahead to the changes happening in the education system, in particular with regards to teaching.

"I'm a little nervous about what it's going to look like whenever it gets to be my turn to have a classroom," said Spiers. "It's a year and a half away. Even as a student, I don't like online classes. I'm scared to go back to in person; I feel like I've lost what it takes to do an in-person class. And I know that grade school students feel the same."

Kate grew aware of the changes in education and how different her future might be. Kate contracted COVID-19 over the holidays and was quarantined with family much of winter break.

Her grandparents contracted the virus, too. “My biggest fear is that my grandparents would have it, the ones who are diabetic or the ones that are sick all the time have had it. They have survived, but that was my biggest fear.”

One of the biggest blessings for Spiers, was that while she was at home, she got to hang out with her baby niece, Spencer, and really get to know her last spring. Spiers has a tight knit family and Spencer is the first baby born in 14 years. Spiers was incredibly grateful to have been able to spend time with Spencer while she was still a baby in the spring. With travel postponed and all events stopping, Spiers really got a chance to spend time with her family during lockdowns.

This upcoming summer, Kate plans to visit the beach and is planning to go on a mission trip to Brazil. She also plans to visit her grandparents in Florida. In the summer of 2020, Spiers was planning to make a trip to Mexico for a mission trip, but the trip was cancelled because the borders were not open. Spiers was also planning to study abroad in Spain for a month, which also got cancelled due to COVID-19.

For college students, concern has never been higher for the health and safety of their family members. Students returning home for Thanksgiving break are ensuring their health before traveling and are isolating before returning to visit older family members. Handwashing and personal hygiene have dramatically improved across the United States, in what will hopefully be a mass improvement in public health during the flu season. (90% of Americans have increased handwashing in efforts to stop the virus spread). Signs are everywhere about “Getting Your Flu Shot” and wearing your mask to save others’ lives. It is evident that concern for health has never been higher. While there are some students who are not cautious and have

broken local health requirements while at school, there are many who are sticking to small gatherings and taking great care to ensure the health of themselves and others.

“I was bitter with the world,
but it kind of allowed me
to be a kid again, to start over.”
Jared Redding

CHAPTER FOUR: CHANGING CAREERS AND EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Seniors at The University of Mississippi left in March 2020 and never came back to campus. Some went off to graduate school to buy themselves time, while others changed their career paths entirely. For seniors, nothing was promised after March 2020. Companies rescinded their offers of employment, taking away internships and jobs for graduates.⁶ Students had counted on finding a position and being able to work post-graduation.⁷ Many seniors graduating in 2021 have decided to do the same.

Choosing Graduate School

Clay Patrick, a senior Integrated Marketing Communication major with a specialization in PR, was working a student job on campus and working an off-campus job at Jimmy Johns on Jackson Avenue. He had to adjust to an uncertain future. The Friday before spring break, Clay was also working in the front office at Farley Hall and wasn't thrilled about working the last day

⁶ Golodryga, B. (2020, May 20). Class of 2020 entering worst job market since Great Depression. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/20/us/bad-job-market-graduates-coronavirus/index.html>

⁷ Garces-Jimenez, M. (2021, January 03). Covid is making college students rethink their 'dream job' and plans for after graduation. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/03/covid-is-making-college-students-rethink-their-dream-job-.html>

before spring break. But as he walked to his car at the Pavilion, the sun was shining, and Clay said he distinctly remembered thinking about how pretty it was outside and how he was going to remember that day forever. Once he left campus that Friday, he'd never return to his on-campus classes.

Patrick said, "I had no intentions of going to grad school ever." He was encouraged by a family friend in January 2020 to consider the option. It wasn't his number one plan; in fact, he was hoping to line up a job in Nashville or a bigger city. Patrick did some research and applied to the PR program at Boston University in mid-February. "As of this year, the PR program at Boston University is the second-best PR program in the country," said Patrick. "I didn't expect to get in here. I really didn't."

Patrick stayed in Oxford during the rest of the spring semester, 2020. He had been working the late-night shift at Jimmy Johns up until March but had just worked out with the manager a break period from March until May. After graduation, he worked at Jimmy Johns all summer in Oxford. That was the case for many seniors at the University. Not only did they not return to finish their senior year, but many also either lost employment opportunities or couldn't find anything. Going to graduate school became the only option for some Senior 2020 graduates.

Ryan Bessen is a master's student in the UM Geology program, hoping to have a career in geological surveying in the future. In March of 2020, he was finishing up his senior year at Illinois State University. He was out in New Mexico on a geology field trip at the time for a spring break trip. About halfway through the trip, he started getting emails from Illinois State saying there was something going on and that they would be keeping an eye on it. Bessen said it started off as one or two emails, then it was quite a few emails within a day.

“We really knew something was up,” he said. “The school was going to force us to come back home. We were probably going to ignore that.” When he returned to Illinois, he continued doing research on campus. He’d gotten most of his work done before the spring break trip, so he didn’t have a lot to do on campus. All of his classes went online, which was difficult because he lived out in the country and didn’t have great access to the internet.⁸

“Basically, you know, I missed out on all the Zoom meetings. Everything that I did was basically over my phone. If I had to email anything, I would drive into campus and sit in the parking lot and use the internet there.” Bessen mentioned that when COVID-19 hit, he never really left his house. He didn’t have to buy groceries for almost two months, and he didn’t have to leave. Being isolated didn’t really bother Bessen. Other than not going into campus, it really didn’t affect my day, he said.

Bessen graduated in May 2020 with an undergraduate degree from Illinois State University and then moved to Oxford, Mississippi to attend graduate school at Ole Miss. At Illinois State, his graduation was virtual, and he didn’t attend it. “I kind of figured, if I can’t go to the real thing, then it’s just not the same,” said Bessen. “I was kind of bummed out about that. But I’m over it now. I didn’t go to my high school graduation or my community college graduation. And I was like, you know, I’m going to my graduation once I get my bachelor’s degree and now, I’m really hoping that I can walk for Ole Miss.”

He teaches structural geology at Ole Miss now as a graduate assistant. When he graduates from Ole Miss, he’d like to get into geologic mapping. He’s actually already completed a couple

⁸ Pan, H. (2020). A glimpse of university students’ family life amidst the COVID-19 virus. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 1-4.

of maps through what's called the ED map grant. If he can't do that, he'd like to work in a quarry or a mine. Bessen said he wouldn't mind working hard all day long because he's done those jobs and feels like he could have a good relationship with them. Bessen was also a teaching assistant at Illinois State University. There he found out he had a passion for teaching as well. "That's another path I could take," said Bessen.

In the next year, Bessen plans to get a lot of work done on his senior graduate thesis as the world begins to return to normal. He also has a map that he needs to complete and plans to start on another map. His thesis is on the Bighorn Mountains out in Wyoming. Bessen also mentioned that a big downside for him is that due to COVID-19, he's never gotten to experience what Ole Miss is like.⁹ "I hear all the stories you know of the Grove. And I haven't gotten to see it. If the whole COVID thing wasn't going on, then I'd probably gone to a few of the games."

Tonia Aminone is working on her second PhD at the University of Mississippi. Originally from Nigeria, she received a Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) degree in Ghana and is now working on another PhD in the Department of Toxicology at the University of Mississippi. The fourth year of her PharmD program, she decided to start applying to grad school. She decided to pursue a second PhD because she loves research, particularly environmental research.

In January of 2020, following a Christmas break, she left her family in Nigeria and went back to Ghana for the final semester of her program. When COVID-19 started with lockdowns in March, Aminone was in Ghana and was locked down. "I wasn't able to go back to Nigeria. I was

⁹ Hubler, S. (2020, June 28). 'We Could Be Feeling This for the Next Decade': Virus Hits College Towns. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/28/us/coronavirus-college-towns.html>

in my University along with my brother. We're both in Ghana, my family was in Nigeria. My other sister was in another state. The only person that was at home was my youngest brother because he was able to leave his university on time," she said. In Nigeria, the number of cases were not high. Even still, Aminone was concerned for her family, she made sure that her family was always wearing the mask and washing their hands. Her parents asked her what she thought about the virus and took safety measures.

Aminone started working in the university hospital in Ghana in January of 2020. This hospital wasn't very far from where she was living at the time. She was working in the Emergency Medicine rotation in early January and after six weeks she went over to Internal Medicine rotation. Four or five weeks into this rotation, there was a complete lockdown. That was when COVID-19 started.

"I remember the last day. I didn't want to enter the ward. Because [as a] PharmD you have to be with the patient and interact with the patient," said Aminone. She did the rest of her rotations online, because only health professionals were able to enter the ward. Some people were able to leave the country before the lockdown, but when they closed the borders, everyone had to go home. All of her rotations went online for the rest of the semester.

Aminone started studying for her final exams and applying for grad school. It was a lot to manage between the rotations, studying and applying for grad school. She was able to write the exams that she needed to write before the lockdown happened. Applying for graduate school was especially challenging. "You are not sure if you can get the grad school application processed and then you're not sure about if with the COVID they'll accept you," said Aminone.

There were a lot of uncertainties about her graduate school program, and she was very concerned about her future. She had a plan to finish her PharmD and go to graduate school.

When COVID happened, everything was up in the air. She was worried about if she'd be able to enter graduate school in August or if she'd be able to see her family in Nigeria before she left?

During lockdown, Aminone talked to her parents on WhatsApp almost every day. Her dad was in lockdown in the state he was in. She has a group chat with her siblings and her parents and a larger family group chat with extended family too. "What also really helped me psychologically was talking to my friends every day," she said. She became close to a friend when rotations started in January, talking in the evening about their day. They talked about their plans and their fears of the future. They also talked about movies they wanted to watch. They also talked about their sleep schedules, which had been messed up at the time. "I was always looking forward to my parent's calls, and my friend's calls. That helped my mental health and anxiety. Also, during that period, I started my YouTube channel." She enjoys blogging and vlogging about her experiences.

Aminone was concerned about shopping in the market. Markets are very crowded, and she was worried about getting COVID. She called a cab driver to take her to the store and bought everything in bulk and brought it back. She arrived in Mississippi on January 4th, 2021 and will be able to be here for five years completing her PhD in Toxicology. The lab she is working in now studies air particles. Because, COVID-19 is airborne, this research is timely and aligns with her methodology. Going to graduate school and studying air particles has added to her confidence. She assessed what was really meaningful to her during quarantine and enjoyed the time it gave her to take a break. It helped to process information, she said. After completing her toxicology degree, she's leaving her future plans open and doesn't want to determine now what her plans are. While in the United States, she wants to experience different aspects of life and develop herself.

Careers on Hold

Jessica Shipp, an Integrated Marketing and Communications major, was finishing up her final semester of classes before graduating and starting her graduate. In March 2020, she was in New Orleans for spring break. On the Wednesday of spring break, Jessica Shipp, she had been invited to a round-one interview with Ogilvy, one of the top public relations firms in the world. She scheduled her Zoom interview for the following week. She returned to Oxford imagining her bright future and back to work with Student Housing as a marketing assistant. On the following Wednesday, she heard that the Institutes of Higher Learning Board was going to vote whether to extend spring break and to push classes online. Shipp began to wonder, “What would our stance be like? What would online classes look like from a housing perspective?”

The phones exploded at Student Housing after hearing that classes would be online and that students were to come pick up their essentials before leaving their dorm for the foreseeable future. “It was kind of stressful and chaotic,” said Shipp. She started thinking, “Am I going to have a job after this? What does this do for the chances of my internship?” Shipp had applied for three different internships with Ogilvy offices located in California, Chicago, and New York. She did her first interview over Zoom the week after spring break, in the midst of the housing crisis on campus. “At the time, I wasn’t that worried,” said Shipp. “Everyone thought this would be over in a month.”

In early April, she received an invitation to do a second-round interview at the New York office, but she received rejection letters from the California and Chicago offices. During this second interview at the New York office, she was told that, “If all goes well, we’ll see you in New York this summer.” It wasn’t official yet, but she was planning to work a summer internship at Ogilvy, and they’d mentioned the potential to hire her immediately following her

internship. “I wasn’t super worried because most people thought this would be over in a month,” said Shipp. “This is my dream company to work for. This is everything I’d wanted. I kept thinking, ‘Wow I have to get ready to move my entire life.’”

Shipp started packing and getting ready to move, waiting for the official email that she’d gotten the internship. Excited, she started looking for small apartments in New York and figuring out her travel arrangements there. Shipp was hoping that by May, things would change.

Weeks passed and on the week of graduation in May, Shipp reached out to an Ogilvy New York contact over LinkedIn to ask about the job. She was told that they never emailed anyone back, and that Ogilvy was on a hiring freeze. “Unless something changed in the next week, the internship wasn’t happening,” said Shipp. “The ground pretty much gave out underneath me. This was the dream. I’d worked so hard to be the candidate for that internship.”

Luckily, in mid-April, Shipp had started thinking through second options in case Ogilvy fell through. She had applied to a position at the University of Mississippi but hadn’t heard back. The week before graduation, she decided to go to grad school. “At that moment, I knew getting a job wasn’t going to happen. Up until that time, I’d sworn off grad school. I didn’t even think about it,” said Shipp. She began thinking about applying to grad school to buy herself time.

Shipp was told by friends, family, and teachers that grad school was the safest option for her. She decided to pick something within a five-to-six-hour radius of her hometown in Southaven, Mississippi. She was really wanting to stay near Memphis or close by in Arkansas. She applied to the University of Memphis. “My life went completely haywire,” said Shipp. “By the month of May, they told me that I’d be accepted regardless and that I was one of the most qualified candidates.” Shipp decided to attend the University of Memphis and will graduate in May 2022 with a master’s in journalism and strategic media.

Shipp saved as much as she could and lived on only what she needed to save money to move to Memphis. Saving as much as she could, she depleted her entire savings to move and was banking on unemployment checks to be able to live. She spent her quarantine in Oxford before graduating and moving to Memphis to grad school. Shipp described her weeks of quarantine as being stressful and draining.

“When I was awake, I’d want to go back to sleep,” said Shipp. “I was stressing about an internship that would never come to fruition. I woke up with these feelings that the world could come crashing down at any moment.” With stress abounding for 2020 seniors, the COVID-19 crisis caused many to question their futures with their dreams now placed on hold.

Shipp applied for a job as the Social Media Coordinator for the School of Music at the University of Memphis and got the job the same afternoon. That job started in August 2020, but she found another position that started in July 2020. Shipp applied to every position available and was worried about putting her degree to use. Now, Shipp works as a teacher’s assistant, teaching geometry. “I actually enjoy teaching,” said Shipp. “I should go after my teaching certification and teach full time.”

Shipp says she intends to continue teaching because it’s the only thing she’s found to be reliable during this time. “I don’t know what the job market will be like next year,” said Shipp. “In the degree I chose, it doesn’t look like it. Whereas, if I went and did Teach for America, I know I would have a job. It’s the safest option. I’m hoping to be engaged next year, so it’s like – I can move in the next year or so. And still be able to teach. It’s just always having a backup plan. Nothing is promised for us at this point.”

Shipp had to tell her parents about her career switch and mentioned how sad it was to have to tell them of the change. Her parents knew how much she loved public relations. Many

other seniors, just like Shipp, struggled to find jobs or changed their careers entirely after they graduated in May 2020. Maggie Smith, a senior graduating in 2021, whose story is discussed in chapter one, also plans to attend graduate school to buy herself time to find a job post-graduation. For many seniors, graduate school was the only option for them. They had to do something to not leave a hole in their resume.

Jared Redding, a senior graduating in 2021 in the journalism program, had a halt in his career in the spring of 2020. At the beginning of the spring, Redding believed that COVID-19 wouldn't really affect him personally and that it was mostly social media. A Mississippi sports reporter and sports communications guru, Redding said that his retaliation of COVID-19's impact was with the Golden State Warriors starting to play with no fans. He then saw lots of other schools start playing with no fans at all.

"I woke up one morning and checked my phone; this was around that time that college basketball tournaments were going on. The Ivy League tournament was cancelled. I was one of those people who thought it was just like the flu. And then next thing you know the Big Ten tournament is cancelled."

With sports journalism as a career plan, Redding's employment came to a halt. The NBA has suspended their season, the SEC tournament was cancelled. From there, all sporting events were postponed up until April 15. Redding thought, "It's just a temporary pause." Redding thought they must have been trying to figure out how they could continue playing and combat COVID-19, but there was so much uncertainty with what was happening. He kept thinking, "It's just a hiatus."

Redding began seeing articles about how contagious COVID-19 was. It was mind boggling, he recalled, how many people were getting it. He mentioned how much

misinformation was out there, because no one had any idea. He said, “It was like oh shoot, this is not the flu, this is not a joke. This is real, I think.”

Finishing up his junior year online with no sporting events to cover or write about, his entire life had been placed on pause. “I’m a very optimistic person, and I like to see the good side. I’m pessimistic internally, because I think sometimes bad things do happen to me. With every bad thing, there’s always going to be a positive, out of it one or way or another, there’s never going to be straight negative.”

Sporting events rely on crowds, of course, and so this presented a big challenge. Sports were an escape from reality for Redding - a pastime, a hobby and a livelihood. He wrote for the Oxford Eagle, worked as a PA at local high school events, ran scoreboards, and covered sports for the Daily Mississippian. Suddenly, that was taken away from Redding. He had just recently been hired at Ole Miss Athletics as a student assistant and that job was on hold in March 2020. He had been planning to make his livelihood within the sports industry.

For Redding, sports were all he knew. “That’s how I’ve always channeled my talents. I’ve never really had a plan B. It was really hard on me for a while,” said Redding. “I was very short with people. I was very temperamental, kind of angry at the world for a little bit. Even with those times, you have to dig deep down and find a level of perseverance and a level of optimism and hope that you’ve never had before.” Sports eventually picked back up and the NBA and NHL bubbles started. Major League Baseball season started in June. Redding still didn’t know if the SEC, ACC, and other conferences, including high school sports, would return in the fall. He decided to just hunker down until the storm passed.

“It was never a matter of ‘OK, Jared, it’s time to get a new job’ or ‘now it’s time to find your occupation.’ He needed to be around what he loved. Over quarantine, Redding began

getting out old LEGO sets and started rebuilding them again without instructions, just to see how well he remembered building them as a kid. He had to return home, just outside of Oxford, Mississippi when all the dorms had shut down. At his family's house, the internet connection was not strong. He didn't have enough internet to be able to binge Netflix playing a lot of video games like Mario Cart, Call of Duty, among others. With his dream on hold, it was something he used to pass the time and to keep his mind off the current situation.

A sports recreation administration minor, Redding had to camp out overnight for a spring project. His writing classes changed. In his advanced reporting class, he had written previously about sports stories. With sports being postponed, Redding had to choose other subjects and stories to write about. He wrote about the financial fallout for summer camps, plans for marching bands in the fall, while waiting for sports to return. "It allowed me to experiment, and try other things," said Redding. "If I screwed up, I screwed up. But at least I learned something from it, and it allowed me to learn. It didn't allow me to be complacent." He didn't live in the city so he couldn't just leave his house and go to the Square or a coffee shop to do classes.

"I was angry at the world," said Redding. "I was bitter with the world, but it kind of allowed me to be a kid again, to start over."

Redding lived on campus and when the dorms shut down in March, his roommate and him both left. They'd lived together since freshman year in Residential College South. When returning to school in August, his roommate had all online classes, so he didn't return to live with him. From March of 2020, to mid-January of 2021, they didn't see each other.

In the fall, he began work for Ole Miss Athletics, writing the recaps for the Ole Miss football team in the press box. Finishing the Fall 2020 season, he was then asked to cover men's and women's basketball the same way. He started handling player substitutions at home games,

for the broadcast and support staff. He was just recently asked to work baseball and softball games for Ole Miss Athletics. This was a chance to anticipate normal life. “I don’t know how much I could prove in one year, because it’s not one of those things you can just kind of do in one year, put on a resume, and people are sold on it. But it’s given me another opportunity that I never had before, and experience, whether I continue doing it or not.”

Redding plans to take a career option that allows him to support his future wife and future family. “If certain things open up, I’m going to take it,” said Redding.” And if things close, I’m going to wait until maybe I can get something better. It’s just whatever comes up best for my future wife and my future family. I’m going to do that.”

“I think there’ll be some fear that will always be there haunting them of the days they were stuck
in their dorms.”
Steve Roark

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDING BALANCE IN MENTAL HEALTH

For many students, mental health became a challenge especially when isolated.

Universities around the nation began to see a mental health crisis as classes and in-person events went virtual. Isolation caused many students to suffer from depression and anxiety.

Student Mental Health Observations

A senior in the Class of 2020, John Macon Gillespie was in Calhoun City when he found out that classes wouldn't be resuming in-person during the spring of 2020. He suspected that classes wouldn't be returning in person when universities around the country started moving courses online. For Gillespie, moving to online classes wasn't easy and he preferred an in-person environment. Fear and anxiety for students dramatically increased as classes moved online.

"At times it was stressful," said Gillespie. "Especially just having to be at home and not being in Oxford." Gillespie did not have great Wi-Fi connectivity at home, so this was an additional stressor. He went to his family's restaurant in Vardaman to use the internet for Zoom classes. Gillespie also is also a sports reporter for the Calhoun County Journal. When baseball season was cancelled for the local high school and college level, he found himself covering COVID stories instead.

"It changed work a lot," said Gillespie. "Suddenly, I was covering feature stories on people making masks instead of stats for baseball games. Sports is a big reason I got into

journalism to begin with. I really enjoy what I do and those stories I've done outside of sports have made me a better journalist. But it's not necessarily what I love to do."

Gillespie struggled with anxiety for most of his life. He started getting help when he got into high school. "When you seek assistance, you have appointments regularly every few months to adjust medication or to see how you're doing. That was out the window because people couldn't visit doctor's offices in person." Gillespie's internet was so bad at the time that he couldn't talk to them over Zoom either. While online addiction is a problem countless people face, the lack of connectivity worsened his mental health.¹⁰ He said that he suffered some, but he'd been in a good place for a few years. It wasn't as bad for him as for others who were just starting out seeking help.

"Being around friends is a really big boost for people who struggle with stuff," said Gillespie. "The same can be said for me. Not being around my friends at college or at home, made things difficult. And not having the social aspect was tough." When COVID hit, individuals had to adapt to not going to therapy or doctor's appointments in person. The Counseling Center had to flip gears entirely. "A lot of kids on campus depend on the counseling center," said Gillespie. "I've never gone there myself, but I know people who have. They depend

¹⁰ Saltzman, L. Y., Hansel, T. C., & Bordnick, P. S. (2020). Loneliness, isolation, and social support factors in post-COVID-19 mental health. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*.

on that. When they were sent home, they might not have someone in their home state or town who is qualified to do that.”

Gillespie wants to tell anything that is newsworthy to the world, especially people’s stories. He is considering teaching collegiately. He decided junior year of college to pursue graduate school. He is in his second semester in graduate school and is getting a master of arts in journalism at the University of Mississippi. In spring of 2020, Gillespie was planning to walk in graduation. “I was really looking forward to walking, and I was really upset about it. There were times as a kid that I dreamed about walking across the stage and getting that diploma at the same school that my parents did. I still dream about that, I guess. Not having that was difficult.”

Gillespie, like many other seniors, received a graduation cap and tassel in the mail. He spent commencement day wearing the graduation cap with his family at their deli in Vardaman. He said customers were coming in and out all day, as he graduated over and over seemingly. “It’s something I’ll be able to tell my grandkids - that I graduated in a restaurant.” He enjoyed being around his family - they were the ones he really wanted there. Gillespie looks forward to having an in-person ceremony and plans to walk in May 2021 with the Class of 2020.

Before quarantine, Gillespie was living in Vardaman and driving back and forth to Oxford. Quarantine gave Gillespie time to spend with God and he spent a lot of time reading and watching TV and playing video games. Gillespie had a lot of time on his hands, and spent it bettering himself. “It was cool to be around family more than I would have been,” said Gillespie. “Even though I was driving back and forth, I spent a lot of time in Oxford before quarantine. We

watched a lot of The Office and the Lord of the Rings movies. We watched a lot of comedy because we needed something uplifting.” Watching comedy decreased their anxiety and helped Gillespie find joy in the midst of the hardship of the times.

Gillespie’s family is super close knit and spending time together strengthened that for them. He truly enjoyed being around his family during quarantine. He looks back on quarantine and feels blessed in ways that he wouldn’t have otherwise. Although times were tough for mental health, Gillespie’s anxiety was improved by being around his family and by spending time with them.

John Riley Wilbanks is a senior in the Integrated Marketing Communications program from Bruce, Mississippi. As a transfer student, he was a semester into the degree at Ole Miss before classes went virtual. In spring of 2020, he had just been hired at First Baptist Church of Oxford as a youth ministry intern in February. They were planning lots of big events for the summer for the youth. When spring break rolled around, he had no plans and stayed home with his family. Wilbanks wasn’t concerned about traveling because of health reasons but chose to stay at home with his family.

“Suddenly, it seemed like everything was crashing,” said Wilbanks. Wilbanks said he remembered when former president Trump got on NBC and said there would be a stay-at-home order. One of the first things he thought about after spring break was his fear for people in

isolation. “I know for the people around me it was super hard, especially being in isolation and in quarantine,” said Wilbanks. “It was really hard for our students.”

Prior to quarantine, First Baptist Church of Oxford had a Sunday night event in the gym, with games for the students. Around July, they opened the church gym back up on a Sunday night to allow students to come in and play games with other students. All the students were wearing masks and the games were social-distanced, like kickball.

“At this point, it had been three months since our kids had played sports. They had not been able to play anything. In that big space of time, they didn’t get to do anything. They were so happy and joyful.” Wilbanks says he feels bad for the students in high school for not being able to talk to others except on social media. When COVID-19 hit, they had to move all events virtual to zoom meetings. They conducted a 21-days of prayer for the students over zoom. Kids became quickly tired of Zoom. They tried to Zoom over the summer with their students, but it was difficult.

“Kids just don’t want to do it,” said Wilbanks. “They want to be in person, they want to talk to people and they want to hug people. Seeing them on screen is heartbreaking.” He mentioned how difficult it was for friends at Ole Miss to move home to Alabama or Tennessee and not being able to see friends. In the spring 2020, one of his roommates stayed in Oxford, but the other one left. “Deep down, I think college students want to be in person. I do know that some people are living their best lives right now on zoom. Some people have taken the opportunity of zoom to travel. Zoom has given us that opportunity to do that now.”

Wilbanks said that he enjoyed the flexibility of using Zoom at home to stay extended weekends and being able to see family at home. Family is really important to Wilbanks.

“My parents are older,” said Wilbanks. “My dad is 67, and my mom is 57. Although, they did have jobs, I didn’t want to be the person to come to Oxford and get COVID, then spread it to my family. For the first few days of quarantine, I really enjoyed getting to see them.”

Wilbanks’s mother works at the hospital and has been working since COVID started. His dad works at a small business and has continued working ever since COVID-19.

“Although it’s great to see them and I love them, it can be hard. You’re used to your schedule and you like to stay up late or go to Cook-Out.” Wilbanks lived in Bruce for the first month of the summer. He came back to Oxford to help with outdoor social distanced youth activities at First Baptist Oxford. Summer camps for the youth were completely cut off.

Wilbanks loved his in-person classes at the University of Mississippi and has enjoyed meeting people in group projects. “I really fell in love with the IMC program. I started praying, ‘is this what you want me to do, marketing?’” He said he considered working for a church helping with branding or marketing communications.

Even though he loved the IMC program, his future plans haven’t changed much because of COVID-19. He plans to live in Oxford for the year after graduation. He’s currently applying to three seminaries. He is also considering going back to Ole Miss and getting his masters in IMC. His future plans are to go to seminary and to go into youth ministry. “If anything, COVID has helped me see that this is what I’m called to do,” said Wilbanks. The virus actually helped Wilbanks, he said. At the beginning, the change of environment hurt him, but it became a

blessing in disguise. “I have been growing more than I have in the past years, because the pandemic has taught me to rely on God more,” he said.

Insights from Mental Health Counselors

When trying to understand the student mindset during COVID-19, speaking to a professional in the mental health sphere became vital. Several counselors volunteered their time to discuss what they had seen and heard from students. The themes of anxiety, depression and isolation as a common concern for college students emerged. Counselors were also concerned about suicide ideations, OCD diagnosis numbers rising following COVID-19, digital media addiction, and substance abuse for students trying to cope with the ever-constant change.

Steven Roark, Minister of Marriage and Family Pastoral Care at First Baptist Church of Oxford, graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1976 with a degree in Social Work. He got married in 1977 and moved to Jackson, Mississippi. He worked in a community mental health center, which is connected to the Department for Mental Health for two years. He decided to further his education because he knew being a therapist was his calling. He moved to Southern Mississippi to the University of Southern Mississippi and got his master’s degree in psychiatric social work. He went back to working at the Community Mental Health Center and worked there for 30 years. Eight years ago, he felt called to a different season of life, as a Christian counselor. He retired from the mental health center and moved back up to Oxford, Mississippi to work as a counselor at First Baptist Church of Oxford. He gets a lot of referrals and does individual counseling and marriage counseling. He sees a lot of students and North Mississippi residents.

When asked about the effects of COVID-19 on students, Roark mentions anxiety and depression. “I’ve seen a lot of anxiety and depression from isolation. Some of us are introverts, most are extroverts, but even the introverts need people. We need Community and we need relationships. This pandemic has put us in a place of real isolation that has led to apathy and not having an active lifestyle.”¹¹

This inactivity has led to a constant dependence on digital connection, where you can spend your whole day in your room but still be connected through technology. Roark mentioned that people are using social media more than they should, saying it’s become a detriment in the pandemic. This technology was taken to the classroom with many courses being taught virtually in Fall of 2020 and Spring 2021. “Some students are not wired to learn online,” said Roark. Some students are failing classes online that they wouldn’t have failed with in person options.

Meanwhile, most students are at low risk of serious health concerns from the virus, unless they have underlying conditions. But students are at a much greater risk for mental health issues.¹² “I have not seen that many of them [students] were really concerned about getting the

¹¹ Hamza, C. A., Ewing, L., Heath, N. L., & Goldstein, A. L. (2020). When social isolation is nothing new: A longitudinal study psychological distress during COVID-19 among university students with and without preexisting mental health concerns. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*.

¹² Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students’ mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of medical internet research*, 22(9), e21279.

virus. It's just being locked up in the rooms and not being able to go to functions and not being able to go to the classroom.”

Roark said his caseload of clients is continually growing. He's talked with other members of the counseling community and they are seeing the same effects on students (increasing depression and anxiety) due to COVID-19. With COVID-19 pushing all interaction to become virtual, Roark moved to telehealth. He counsels over facetime and Zoom now. Even though telehealth has been an opportunity, “there's nothing like being face to face with somebody. Eighty percent of communication is nonverbal like tapping their feet or crossing their legs or arms.” Roark mentioned that a benefit of telehealth is the opportunity to counsel and see people who wouldn't typically have been able to be seen because of isolation. “Through telehealth, we've been able to communicate more and give people an opportunity.” Using Zoom for counseling fills a part of the hole of isolation, but not all of it. “But it's better than not filling the hole at all,” said Roark.

Roark mentioned his concern for students with suicidal tendencies, which have grown immensely in the past few years.¹³ The isolation is continuing to be studied, but Roark thinks that the results of studies will be groundbreaking. “In 10 years, the ratio is going to be astounding as to the effects of interpersonal thought to relationships to community.”

¹³ Santos, L. (2021, February 10). HARDtalk: Can we learn how to be happy? Retrieved February 26, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3cszc7p>

Roark compared today's world to the world of his grandparents' living in the Great Depression. "I think that this generation will be impacted until they are my age. I think there'll be some fear that will always be there haunting them of the days they were stuck in their dorms."

In a sense, Roark said that this generation will view their life differently because of the pandemic. Their generation of students will be the end of a culture. Roark also said that the economy, politics, anxiety, and depression all play a role creating a "perfect storm" bearing down on college students.

With many students separated from family away at school, it can be reasoned that there would be overwhelming fear for family members. Roark mentioned that he doesn't hear a lot of fear for family health, although he said that this fear has to be there and just isn't discussed by students. He does hear about the overwhelming challenge of isolation from students. Students are turning to drinking or to drugs to cope with the overwhelming fear of isolation and change. Roark's interview highlighted the need for further understanding of the depression and anxiety that students were facing. Tiffany Lewis, owner of Grace Counseling Services in Oxford, Mississippi, provided some additional information about the physical and mental health crisis facing the University of Mississippi.

Tiffany Lewis has been in private practice in Oxford Mississippi for six years. She's been in the field of mental health for about 11 years following receiving a master's degree. She worked in community mental health and then went into private practice, just like Steve Roark. Her first exposure to Mental Health was at the University of Mississippi where she received a minor in psychology. Her master's degree was in marriage and family therapy from the reformed

theological seminary in Jackson. Her degree in Marriage and Family Therapy within a clinical master's program. She currently works with all ages from school age to adults, including college students in Oxford.

Lewis explained that community health is really a government form of counseling. It is sponsored by the Department of Mental Health. Each county has a clinic, and they do a lot of crisis triage or recovery support. When asked about the effect COVID-19 has had on students, Lewis said, "It's kind of been like the whole world; I guess it's just been a shock for a lot of folks. We basically hit spring break last March, which has been almost a year now. Some of my students from Ole Miss went on spring break and didn't come back for a month or two months."

Lewis said that approximately seventy-five of the people she worked with stayed at home. Students were thrown into virtual classrooms.¹⁴ Lewis said that she's seen a lot of students struggle with that. "The fall was really hard for a lot of mine," said Lewis. "Some of them, all they had were online classes, and if you already have something like ADHD and you're thrown into something like online self-study or self-paced, it's really hard to stay organized and to do time management."

Between Blackboard, Zoom, Email and GroupMe, Lewis said that students struggled to process all the information. Academic support systems, like face-to-face communication with teachers, reminders on assignments (like would happen in an in-person class), advising support,

¹⁴ Toquero, C. M. (2020). Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Philippine Context. *Pedagogical Research*, 5(4).

were gone for the most part. Students struggled with their grades in the fall. “Academically, it’s been a big transition. And a lot are just really isolated. I have some that only see their roommates and they don’t have any social events they can go to. Campus activities are very limited. When you live far away from your family, that can be really hard if you start to feel lonely or isolated.”

Lewis mentioned that the gym or utilizing physical activity to manage the stressors is a great outlet, but a lot of students weren’t able to go to the gym. Gyms were closed for a long time and now they are open, but you have to make appointments to go to the gym. “Some people that would go to the gym aren’t anymore, because of the logistics,” said Lewis. “Of course, in winter, they’re not outside as much. They’re not going to go walk in the park then. Definitely physical health has taken a toll, as well as mental health with the limitations that COVID-19 has provided for everybody.”

Lewis made the point that physical activity is most often used to relieve stress.¹⁵ Physical activities that people used to cope, were just taken away very abruptly in March. Some people got pets over quarantine, as a way to cope with the virus while being socially isolated. One of the biggest ways to stay mentally healthy is to stay physically healthy, said Lewis.¹⁶

Counselors continue to be concerned about social connections, as people are suffering in silence. Professionals are continuing to utilize telehealth to meet with individuals. Lewis, like

¹⁵ Glowacz, F., & Schmits, E. (2020). Psychological distress during the COVID-19 lockdown: The young adults most at risk. *Psychiatry research*, 293, 113486.

¹⁶ Santos, L. (2021, February 10). HARDtalk: Can we learn how to be happy? Retrieved February 26, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3cszc7p>

Roark, also mentioned the downside of not being able to see nonverbal communication as well in a telehealth setting. Lewis went through a telehealth certification and utilizes medical software, like zoom with double encryption, to ensure client safety when counseling.

Lewis stated that using Telehealth was helpful as students went home for holiday breaks, keeping a short gap between visits which improves care for students.

Some states around us have loosened their Telehealth restrictions, which has allowed Lewis to counsel individuals who are located outside of the state borders. Lewis says she thinks that eventually they will tighten their Telehealth restrictions back up, but she plans to continue offering telehealth following COVID-19 while following regulations because it is helpful in counseling her clients who don't live in Oxford.

Lewis mentioned that roughly 30 percent of people diagnosed with COVID wind up with anxiety or depression. "A lot of that is just a natural pandemic response," said Lewis. "It's something new, so you're going to have anxiety because you don't know how your body is going to respond. You don't know how sick you're going to be." Research shows that this isolation may cause neurological changes in older people, the more geriatric population. This isolation may actually start dementia for some people. Once again, students do have a reason to be anxious and fearful for their older family members and their health. Lewis is also concerned about an increase in obsessive compulsive disorders following COVID-19 in school age kids.

"We basically for 12 months have been conditioning them to wear your mask, don't get close to people, use your GermX, and wash your hands for 20 seconds," said Lewis. "We're kind of conditioning some of our younger brains to have a fear of getting sick, of germs, of contact

with others. It could definitely affect college age, but I think at this point, you have more context to sort through that, but I'm really concerned about our school aged kids.”

Kathy King is a counselor who was born and raised in Oxford, Mississippi. She has a triple major in psychology, Spanish, and social work from the University of Mississippi. After graduating, she spent some time abroad before returning to Southeastern Theological Seminary in North Carolina to get two master's degrees. She worked for five years as a pastoral counselor in North Carolina. Three years ago, she moved back to Oxford, Mississippi. She is hoping to become a licensed counselor in Mississippi, passing the national counselor exam a few months ago. King currently does informal counseling for students for a campus ministry at the University of Mississippi.

College can be a stressful time for students, especially when a student doesn't know many people. The pandemic made things a lot more different for everybody, King said. Being unable to return following spring break affected all students. Seniors were unable to complete their final year or to have a graduation ceremony. All students weren't able to have closure from the semester or to tell their graduating friends goodbye. Incoming freshmen were impacted because they weren't able to participate in the standard orientation events. Freshman had the challenge of meeting people on campus with restrictions and mask requirements. For students with friends graduating, there was heartbreak and grief over the time lost.

“When you're not able to say those goodbyes, that can bring a lot of grief,” said King. “That can be a big challenge. The isolation through the pandemic, lack of face-to-face classes, and limited social gatherings have made a big difference. Being on zoom all the time drains

you.”¹⁷ For students, the day-to-day life takes more energy, for example, going to the grocery store or going to social events can be exhausting. King said that she was seeing less motivation and less energy, which can be signs of depression and stress. King has talked to many students this semester and worked through anxiety and stress concerns with students. Students are anxious about getting sick, worrying about the workload in online classes, and are concerned about their future. Prolonged stress can impact general health, heart, blood pressure, moods and emotions, said King.

The social interaction provided to students has been limited to mostly virtual events. King is concerned about students having outlets to communicate, in particular the students who live by themselves or who are isolated in quarantine. She noted that participating on Zoom every day is different from physical interaction on campus.¹⁸ Being emotionally drained and then continuing to zoom may lead to more anxiety she said. Having different locations for different areas of your life, like class and work, can provide boundaries to separate areas. Right now, these boundaries aren’t possible. “It’s extremely easy for a person to become isolated.”

¹⁷ Aguilera-Hermida, A. P. (2020). College students’ use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to Covid-19. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 1, 100011.

¹⁸ Minta, M. (2021, February 25). 'It's bittersweet': Students, faculty reflect on college in the time of COVID. Retrieved February 26, 2021, from <https://mississippitoday.org/2021/02/25/its-bittersweet-students-faculty-reflect-on-college-in-the-time-of-covid/>

In the spring, people seemed to realize that they had to get out and exercise for the sake of their mental health. Students visited trails and parks in an effort to get out of their apartments, said King. Getting outside seemed to be the only way to stay sane in a dark time.

As the world begins to return to normal, King notes that everyone has been forever changed by this pandemic.¹⁹ “Social distancing was not a term we ever used. That is really changing our culture. Post COVID, it’s going to feel weird to not have masks.” For students that were unable to walk at their graduation ceremonies or for students that had limited wedding ceremonies, those situations are hard and there was grief that came with that. The mental health of students all across America has been gravely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁹ Pinsker, J. (2021, February 22). The Most Likely Timeline for Life to Return to Normal. Retrieved February 27, 2021, from https://apple.news/AOw2w_a84RfKIa3uCkxM-Ew

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This past year has been the most challenging one of my life. I found that as I surveyed students and observed their stories, I learned a great deal about myself and about the place I occupy in the world. At the beginning of writing, I really thought, “There’s no way I end this in a better place mentally than when I started. I will probably finish writing this thesis saddened and angry about what has happened. I’ll end this depressed about the future.” I truly believed that the stories would end up hurting me more than they helped. I worried a bit that they would cause me to slowly spiral into depression.

But then something happened. As I was interviewing peers, a common theme emerged in their stories. Every student that I talked to said the same thing, in different ways. Indirectly or directly, the word, “hope” emerged from the interviews. A hope for a better future, a hope for the end of the pandemic, a hope for safety, and a hope of being reunited with family. Students were resilient, facing adversity and conquering our fears, often with no one to help them.

Over the summer of 2020, I grieved deeply from loss, although I didn’t recognize it. It took months for me to process the fear and anxiousness and to understand it. In July, I knew my senior year was gone. I knew that I likely would not be in person for any classes my senior year. I knew my career opportunities would be limited upon graduation. I knew there was a chance that I would lose family to the virus. My worries were real and were the same for many other students.

Here at the end of this thesis, I am surprised. I do believe that the pandemic has harmed students. Depression, anxiety, suicide, and stress have all escalated for them. There is no doubt that studies will continue to come out showing the long-term effects on mental health. But for me, writing these stories has healed me. I feel like a weight has been taken off my shoulders as I realize that we're all in the same boat. We all had the semester end in an unexpected way. We all worried for family members. We all struggled in online classes or lost a job. But I think, the greatest part of this story is not what happened to us but is what will come out of the pandemic.

Students are more resilient now than we ever have been. As I interviewed students, I found that six themes emerged within family, career, and mental health. These themes were importance of family, health over career, the challenges of isolation, struggles with virtual education, increasing depression and anxiety, and the future not promised. I also found that isolation was an overarching theme, that all others seemed to stem from. Even in isolation, there was hope clinging in the darkness. We hope for a day when this will be gone, but until then we're capable of adapting to the constant changes. We know our future isn't promised so we're working our hardest to find a way. Our family is important to us, now more than ever. Because of this, we value our health and the health of others as important to protect.

As I struggled through the summer of 2020, I turned to scripture reading to hear God's voice. I endeavored to listen to Him in the midst of the chaos, searching for hope. One of my favorite passages of the Bible is Psalm 27. It has given me hope in the midst of deep grief and I continue to read over these verses for the comfort they provide. Psalm 27: 13-14 says, "I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD."

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