**Quotes and Observations from Interviews of Dissertation Chairs**

**Productivity:**

A major theme identified in all 12 open-ended interviews centered around the productivity of online doctoral students during COVID-19.

Most students of the Chairs who were interviewed have experienced increased student productivity.  As one Dissertation Chair noted about the doctoral students, “They have more time right now, and they are using it the best way they know how. They are working more on their writing, they submit more often, and they just want to use the time to get closer to graduating.” Similarly, Odette calmly stated that, “Regardless of the situation, we continue to progress.” William also recalled, "I have one, she said, 'I'm gonna do this, I don’t care what happens', and I am getting more of that sentiment." Elizabeth stated that, “It's interesting, one student I had did have COVID, mildly. She was all excited because she had off for two weeks and was able to work on her dissertation!"  William felt students are more productive, but felt the pandemic has been a motivator to do more anyway.

Kate gave many examples of how student productivity has increased.  Students are at home now and have more flexibility to schedule meetings with her than previously.  This difference was observed especially during the summer months for K-12 teachers who are doctoral students.  Kate observed that the students had far more time-on-task “now that they are used to working from home.”  “It has increased, and therefore my workload has increased.”  Some students want the Chair to review 2-3 revisions per week now.  Students who found themselves at home working found an extra 15-20 minutes here and there between tasks to get dissertation work done.  The Chair didn’t necessarily have that change and that extra time.  Kate tries to keep up, and sometimes is working well into the night on a Friday night, especially if students need a quick turnaround in order to progress to the next phase of the dissertation process.  Elizabeth echoed this change for K-12 teachers who are doctoral students, noting an observation from the initial school shutdowns in the spring: “Some of the teachers when they got sent home and things were kind of a mess they did have extra time because the schools didn’t know what to do."  The change in workload for Dissertation Chairs based on increased student productivity made some Chairs wonder about the abrupt shift.  “If this is our new world…” asked Kate, “is this temporary or permanent?”

According to some of the Dissertation Chairs, a smaller number of students have decreased their productivity. Janice believes that, "it's less than half. A third have decreased, severely decreased productivity." She clarified that some are down to 2-3 hours a week, and that is not sufficient.  Elizabeth surmised that, "A certain portion, a third of them have decreased...I can't say there is a real increase." in regard to the other 2/3rds.  Elizabeth also recalls a Dissertation student who said something like, "Oh, COVID. I really couldn't work this week.' I mean, what do you do with that? She is caring for an elderly father, but to just say I really can't work this week, I've never had that before."  Kate echoed these thoughts, by stating that a few students have used COVID-19 as a “The dog ate my homework excuse.”  The Chair is unhappy when this does happen with those few students, because most students do seem to persist even with huge difficulties and obstacles (such as severe illness, etc.).  For Diana, doctoral student productivity has varied.  “For some working at home, a few were able to get more done, but I think overall it (productivity) has decreased” for her students.

The Dissertation Chairs shared explanations for why some students were less productive than others.  Certain obstacles appeared to be faced by only some doctoral students, and some of these challenges have been especially difficult to overcome.  Janice noted that educators and others in similar situations have become less productive due to their job demands. However, some people are in better shape now that they work from home and may have gained 2-3 hours a day, depending on their living situation.  According to Kate, some students who are also K-12 teachers are struggling with having to suddenly teach online, especially those with what she called “really awful online teaching situations,” such as having to do live Zooms 6 hours a day every day.  Elizabeth gave insight to the shared phenomenon: "Related to the dissertation itself, I feel like people are just a little bit more, in general, disorganized." She mentioned that people seem to be waiting and then just getting a little piece in each week, adding "That's not bad; they're hanging in there."  Diana also noted that she has had students go through many personal issues, such as severe illnesses (in both COVID and normal times), which directly affects productivity for her students.

Evelyn noted several times during her open-ended interview that she observed two distinct phases during COVID-19.  During the first phase, students were scrambling, anxious, less focused, and less productive.  Then, during the second phase, things settled into a different pattern.  Her students appeared to have less anxiety, were more focused and on-task and are spending more time on their dissertations.  Many were working from home and are carving out time for their dissertations, with “more time to engage and dialogue about their research.”  Their dissertations may now have been “the first thing on their mind” whereas it might not have been previously, such as when teaching K-12 in person, pre-COVID.  When the schools went online in the spring, some of Evelyn’s students had more time to reach out to her, which resulted in increased productivity. “They have more time because they are working from home and don’t have some of the competing job demands that they had before.”  In her descriptions of the two distinct phases, Evelyn did note that some students have slowed down their productivity.  She described two groups – either students who have had a family member or someone close become very ill or even die due to COVID or students who had underlying health conditions (such as cancer) and they have become ill or exposed to COVID, and noted that this group is quite small.  In Eveyln’s words, “For those students that it’s impacted, it truly has impacted, and it might not have if this hadn’t happened…They become less productive because their worry shifts from their work and their research and rightfully so to their health.”

A final note on productivity during COVID-19 comes from Diana, whose overall philosophy is summarized as follows: “I always say that life happens when you’re doing your dissertation.”  Diana continued that during COVID-19 “Just being able to continue on with your work is huge.  People would classify that as going well.  You are able to do it with all of the stress of being shut in, constant family togetherness, and such.  Just in general still surviving.  I guess you could call that a ‘well thing.’”

**Communication:**

A second theme that clearly emerged from the interviews with Dissertation Chairs revolved around communication between the Chair and the doctoral student.  Most of the Chairs experienced more frequent communication with students.  They mentioned shared Experiences, such as “I sent more emails to check on people, I tried to tie into my own feelings and use that to drive how I communicated with my students.” Elizabeth noted, "I know there has been an increase in time I've spent on the phone."  Part of this theme of increased communication may be due to the philosophy of the university.  Elizabeth - "Regular communication. Every week, expected at (name of university). Other places it is not quite that way.”

Chairs also described an increase in non-academic discussions. “Be present, they cannot function with you just giving feedback. It can not be insidious, they need to meet right now every week, for some Covid or no-  Covid, they just need to touch base.”

These non-academic discussions often led to an increase in the sharing of personal connections and stories.

Many students are more distracted, due to stress, money, a change in jobs (working from home, children at home) “Students are often apologizing for their kids making noise in the background,  they need to know you understand, and that together we will get through.” “People need people, and right now we may be the only people that can or will make a connection.” Likewise, Joan indicated:

Right now many students need us to focus more on the whole person, we have to care, listen and just make a genuine connection. Some just need a venue to share their stories, they just need to talk, and I let them. You try to keep up the traditional boundaries, but they just really need to feel connected to us more right now.

Many Chairs cited the specific need for increased emotional support.  The Dissertation Chair role is not simply an academic one, but involves ongoing and long-term mentoring and social-emotional aspects.  Diana explained, “From the emotional standpoint, you have to keep them on-task, but you also have to be there when life happens to them and just hang in there with them.”  In general, students are “more scattered” during COVID.  “That’s to be expected.”  Diana has experienced what she called more “hand-holding” than usual, and also observed that, “I’ve had a few that have had more anxiety.”  Kate mentioned how she reassured her anxious doctoral students, “Let me worry about that..Let me manage your project.”  William similarly recalled his communication strategy: "I'm getting in a situation where I always ask them in a Zoom session or in a phone call, 'How are things going with you? Are you ok? Are your family members ok? I get all kinds of different reports. Fortunately, not getting a lot about deaths, but about illnesses."  Janice’s strategy applies similarly: "I guide them through any help they need along the way. I take their calls, texts, whatever almost immediately. I empathize with them with whatever they are going through."  Janice also discussed a student who needs almost daily reminders. She said, "Normally, non-Covid, I'm not doing that for anybody."  Elizabeth also observed that she has students who need to talk to her every week. Part of it is due to them lacking some skills. Partly it's due to COVID. Elizabeth explains that, "You have to be careful though. It's like tough love, you can't be too nicey, nicey. You can give them sympathy and understand then you have to go back and hit it otherwise you're not doing them any good." In her personal opinion as a former principal, "If anybody feels like COVID was affecting them, it's ok to listen, but then you just got to go on."

Some Dissertation Chairs outline specific changes in their own communication strategies with their students.  For example, Diana noticed the following: “I keep a more detailed checklist and if I haven’t heard from them in a couple of weeks, I do a reach-out.”  A lot of them respond to text, and this has worked well for this Chair and her students.  “Texting has increased.”  Diana feels that she has probably increased synchronous contact since the pandemic.  “I’m reaching out a little bit more. I have a couple of nurses.  (For one in particular) She had it.  Her husband had it.  They were really stressed.”

In terms of communication strategies, Odette made the realization that most people now are using Zoom.  Her advice was to make yourself available as a Chair, paying close attention to time zone differences and other factors that could potentially inhibit communication.  She explained, “If I have to set my alarm clock to get up at a certain time, I will” and that this makes the students feel special and that their Chair and other support personnel (such as advisors and university/school leadership) are there for them.  “I also try to provide videos,” she noted, in order to increase contact and connection with students during COVID. Odette stressed the need for having genuine conversation, citing examples of two students in crisis involving their stress and mental health.  The Chair made sure to connect with the student and connect the student to help/resources.  Chair noted that while the interactions have increased somewhat, her overall philosophy and approach remain the same as always.  “I have always been a hands-on person. It’s all about communicating and developing a positive relationship with your students.”  “If I don’t hear from them, then they’re going to hear from me.” Odette noted that she realizes all students can have a “weak moment” and she wants them to all know how much she cares about them earning their degree.  “COVID has affected everyone mentally, including me.” (She has lost friends and had others who have been ill.  She even had COVID herself but recovered).  “I tell my students, life happens, and we have to make adjustments to life.”

Michelle offered a counterpoint that, "I think not being different in the way you interact with students and provide feedback. I think that is important, so that they have some sense of normalcy. So, it is consistent to the way it was done before."  Keeping a sense of normalcy amid the crisis could be a useful strategy.  Another strategy was offered by Evelyn, whose “open-door” policy to communication appears to help the students who communicate with her more often move along more quickly and be more focused and determined.  Evelyn  notes that she tries to be understanding of students making errors or not incorporating feedback, etc., because they are emotionally overloaded, “because of other things that are going on that are taking over their brain.”

Of interest was a spark of innovation and updates to some Chair’s unique approaches to communication.  Kate noted that she said to her students,  “We really haven’t had anything like this before.”  Kate continued that, “Students sometimes get a little bit stressed out so I have to be a little bit more of a cheerleader than I already was.  My cheerleader volume has been dialed up a little bit now.”  She described her role as both cheerleader and  project manager, which used to be equal parts but is not more
“cheerleader.”  Kate’s emails from students and submissions of assignments/work have increased, and students are asking more questions than previously.  There is what Kate describes as more “back and forth.”  Students are more willing to ask “bigger questions” and are getting used to “asking these questions and living in this world where we are working from home and we are being fully online.  It just has brought out something in a lot of my students that I think is a positive in the way that we work at (the university).”  Students are making more resubmissions in the same online dropbox, with more comments, like an ongoing discussion happening in the dropbox comments.  This is challenging for the Chair to keep up with.  Chair encourages them to “be as communicative as they possibly can” (most important aspect of being a doctoral student).  Kate stressed the role of a  shared experience of COVID. Kate and her medical doctor believed she had COVID early on in the pandemic but didn’t know that’s what it was. She noted that she can relate personally when her students are ill with COVID or when they have other related issues, such as ill family members.  “It’s something that I can really relate to.”  Chair cited one example of her student who had COVID around the same time she and her doctor believe she had it.  She and the student suffered in similar timelines and still check in on each other about their health and wellness.   “I can talk about it from a personal standpoint.  They can see that in this world, that they’re not alone.  I think that’s something that’s extremely important.”  Kate also cited the feeling of “fear” that many people are going through.  “That’s a role that I never thought I’d have...That’s a big change, being a healthcare consultant” of sorts.

Evelyn described student experiences during COVID-19 as two phases, each phase with specific issues to address.  “Phase one was the shut-down or the lock-down.  Phase two was like this ongoing type of world that we have with new guidelines, procedures, and processes.”  Student anxiety in phase one was very much increased.  Students were even worried about their program continuing to exist in general.  They weren’t sure about their safety and their family’s safety.  Many of our students are older and non-traditional students with busy lives (taking care of relatives, families, etc.).  They were worried things would continue to get worse.  Chair felt a strong need to connect with the students during this time to reassure them.  “This is impacting everybody” (unlike a hurricane, for example).  Chair’s students would reach out to her to make sure she was OK.  Chair has always fostered strong interpersonal relationships with students.  They know about each other’s lives and care about one another.  “We have students who have been through some traumatic situations, and it might show itself in a variety of ways.”  Chair always tries to “keep my ears open when I’m listening to students and to listen to what they’re not saying in addition to what they’re saying and how they are reacting to things” (maybe overreacting to feedback, for example).  “I wonder if something else is going on,” the Chair says, and she redirects the discussion to *read between the lines* (Maggie’s words).  Evelyn noted that her background in counseling and psychology may impact her practice as a Dissertation Chair, especially with regard to emotional support. “I’ve tried to be even more compassionate and understanding and that all of us are multi-layered people.”

As a Chair, Evelyn provided different types of supports during these specific phases.  “I’ve spent more time with students” and longer conversations.  She really asks how they and their families are doing.  She wants them to know that she recognizes the challenges. Evelyn has also increased collaborative meetings between the doctoral committee and the student or between the Academic Success Center and student via Zoom meetings.  Evelyn tells her students, “Call me if you need to talk about something…If that’s the time that you have to work on your research and you have a question, I want to make sure I can give you real-time support so you can break through that barrier and continue working.”  A lot more students have initiated phone calls (shorter and more targeted calls) during COVID.  Students implement the feedback right away in that circumstance.Chair/student shared experience of COVID.  Chair notes that she and the students are checking in on each other, recognizing that all of us are going through similar issues (Chair and students have some things in common, such as with their families, and will discuss this at more length due to COVID and what we are all going through).  Shared experiences and understanding. Chair’s young adult daughter went through a COVID scare.  She had the self-realization that this was a difficult week for her as the Chair and that her own feelings may impact her relationships and ways she communicates with students.  Chair reflected on her own feelings during this difficult week.  “I had to get into another headspace when it came to my students.”  She knows that we “all have ups and downs” and tells this to her students. Chair notes connecting with a student whose personal and professional mentor died of COVID.  Chair felt a strong need to support this student and continue to check in, both academically and emotionally, especially emotionally.  With these social-emotional aspects in mind, Michelle explained, "I think students are reluctant, they are more likely to tell you they need the medical help than the mental help. They're not as open to tell you they have been really depressed and unable to do their work. I think this is due to the stigma attached to mental health."

**Resources:**

A third theme that emerged from the interviews is the increased utilization of university resources by doctoral students during COVID-19.  Resources mentioned included: theAcademic Success Center, Writing Coaches, library supports, other supports, the shared social space for students (Commons), webinars, and more  Joe discussed, “Before students were busy, they didn’t have time or find time to use the great resources we have here at the University.”  This theme of increased use of resources connects to the first two major themes of productivity and communication.  Janice explained that the university "has the ASC, the writing center; we have much better support for that than anywhere else I have seen to date, and I've seen a bunch."Diana surmised that, “Already being online has made it easier for them.” Since this university was already fully online, students may have faced fewer obstacles compared to other universities that had to abruptly switch modalities.

William added what he called:

This added dimension of stress, if I see any of them faltering at all, I direct them to their academic adviser and tell them look take a leave of absence. Just don’t try to do this in this situation. I have probably recommended taking more leaves of absence than I ever have.

Michelle’s sentiments: "I just try to listen and problem solve at the individual level. Not a change though from before Covid."  Michelle explained that she is flexible and understanding, giving struggling students ideas on how to catch up when things settle down. If students are too overwhelmed she recommends they speak to their adviser about a Leave of Absence.

Social-emotional aspects of resources that are always available...Kate realized that the online social network at the university and other online supports that are always readily available provide not only academic support, but emotional support and ongoing connection for the students.  “The emotional support…comes from so many different places, and probably places that we don’t even know about.”  Evelyn said that as a Chair, she has always asked students to “reach out” to resources (ASC, library, counseling resources that they may have available, advisors).  If a student were to need an extension and would reach out, she would definitely consider that.  Evelyn has also specifically reached out a lot to the school’s administration to make sure she hasn’t lost perspective on a particular student, etc.  Looking for input and making sure she remains centered and on-track with the students.  Administration has been very helpful in helping her “think through things.”  “It’ll give me that extra little boost…to continue to support the students.”

Some dissertation chairs utilized a creative approach, adapting to the situation of COVID-19 by creating some new resources for students. Kate created Podcasts for her students (they can get cheerleading, encouragement, and tips from her even when she is asleep and/or unavailable).  Encouragement via podcasts that she has created.  “More asynchronous learning materials for students, so it’s accessible 24/7.  If you need something specific, I hope I have an answer for you in one of the podcasts.”  Chair is experimenting with different ways to produce the Podcasts (some mechanisms might be better and more accessible to students than others).  One Podcast labeled “tough love” might be good for some students, but not others, they can choose which ones they need/want to listen to.  *Maggie’s note – This is almost like cloning herself for a few FAQs and common issues she has noticed that students need/want – noted that it’s like Obi wan or Superman’s parents.*  Chair wants to create more and more of these materials.  “If you’re awake at 3:00 in the morning…you still have that, and you have that in my voice.”  It’s a little bit of entertainment, too.  Chair has worked on being a passionate, engaging, and warm speaker for the Podcasts.

**Impacts:**

A final major theme that emerged from the open-ended interviews with Dissertation Chairs was the impacts on specific phases of the dissertation process.  Chairs noted various challenges and solutions, including some creative approaches during this time of crisis, as well as the need to think quickly and differently than before in order to address these potential obstacles.

Most notable were impacts due to changes in data collection and recruitment for dissertation studies.  Sue indicated “They need to change their study, they need me to say everything will be OK.” Sue further noted:

The schools just don’t want to be bothered with research right now, and the students feel lost.  They have spent months building studies, and now they are panicked to know that schools that once said they could do the research are now saying no.”  They can’t observe, they can’t interview in person, they just really have to change the way they think about collecting data and from whom.

Joan also discussed challenges with research:

We have really learned that we have to rely on more non-traditional recruitment methods for social science research, we have to use social media and snowball recruitment, and we just have to be very creative and open minded right now to help our students fulfill their research aspirations, it’s just changed our entire paradigm about how we conduct research in education.

When further asked about the deeper impacts of the crisis on the doctoral students, Joan noted:

Many students have also begun to imbed the issues surrounding the pandemic into their dissertations, we are seeing it impact their research, they are learning more about previous emergency education situations, they want to know more about how it impacts students and how they can incorporate what we are learning on the fly into better helping students. This really is an amazing way our doctoral students are helping impact the changing face of K-12 education.

Odette echoed this emerging theme: “Collecting data has been the biggest challenge.” Chair cited examples, such as having to change to Zoom interviews.  Even archival data is difficult to obtain because school district offices are difficult to contact and to get to help.  Chair helped students overcome these obstacles so that they persisted.  “Our job is to be resilient.”  Chair cited an example of her student who was almost 80 years old upon completing the doctorate recently, after 4 attempts at doing doctoral studies.  “Whatever passion that brought them to us, I like to ride that passion wave.”

Other Dissertation Chairs shared similar examples.  Janice - A student was going to compare two different ways of teaching mathematics, but with COVID-19 cannot do it, so her study changed to deliver learning centers in Zoom during breakout sessions. Elizabeth stated, "I just had one doing some analysis of the technology [at a school], this started pre-COVID. That one took off like fire because the principal wants to know everything that can be done, right now." William noted how some students are beginning to rethink why they are doing the doctorate. He mentioned a student realized she would not have to go back in the classroom after she gets her doctorate. He added, "I think more of my students are looking at the future in a different way." He continued, "I think a lot of people are in denial, but my students seem to be more realistic. They work in the school system and some are nurses.  They realize there is going to be a new normal and they need to be able to find their way in that new normal."

Kate found that a large part of her role involved helping students through these difficult obstacles. She told her students, “Hey – We have options, let’s walk through this and let’s decide what it is that we want to do.  Let me freak out about it.  Let me be in a little bit of a panic,” to help put her students more at ease about the obstacles.  Kate further explained, “I had 3 students who were in the middle of data collection – in-person data collection, and everything shut down.”  All 3 students were already “in a role at their institution where they put out fires.”  These 3 students were well-prepared to deal with this sudden challenge with data collection.  They “weren’t in an absolute panic, because it isn’t in their nature to do that.”  Everyone was able to change their data collection methods and sometimes even got higher quality data due to the switch.  For example, the Zoom interviews made it easier for students to schedule interviews with participants. Example of a student who ended up streamlining things due to COVID, study ended up much better in the end.  She had to change almost everything “in a good way.”  Kate feels that her student came up with something more innovative and participants were especially willing to help, and were “very responsive and receptive.”  In the end, the student got far more responses and things were far more “speedy” with recruiting participants and doing interviews once he switched to Zoom interviews.  Kate feels that the creative thinking and improvements made it more streamlined, feasible, and quick.

Additional impacts were noted by many of the Dissertation Chairs, including- financial, life changes, and household issues that caused doctoral students to face related challenges.  William explained a financial concern on the minds of Chairs and students, "My concern Is three months from now. We are at the verge of experiencing an insane economic crisis. I'm afraid that is going to impact a lot of my students." Evelyn noted that some students have lost their job or their job has been impacted.  They are worried about their finances and completing their degree program due to finances.

Household changes and challenges resulted in many issues for doctoral students.  Evelyn explained that a lot of the students have children at home who are now in virtual learning and are “having to balance all of those roles.”   Diana also observed that many K-12 teachers are now suddenly teaching online.  This is a newly shared experience for some doctoral students and Chairs.  “It’s affected all of us,” stated Evelyn, “I’m more scattered, too.  It’s to be expected.  There’s comfort in that because we’re all going through the same thing.”  William detailed the household experiences of his students during COVID-19: "I've got a student, she's sitting here trying to do her dissertation and she's got five grandkids home from school in the same house, and it's not a big house. So, she works in the closet. She goes in and closes the door and tells them not to mess with her." He noted later he feels she can do it, but she seems depressed from his perspective and he doesn't want to lose her.”  Michelle also observed that, "I have a lot of retired educators who are in the program. I have seen that some of them have taken on grandkids while parents work. Now when we call, they are interrupted ten times by a two year old in the background. I can commiserate with that, so I try to be as welcoming of that."  Similarly, Janice knows that a lot of her doctoral students are k-12 educators and they have been very affected by having to move online suddenly. "Students who are educators have had an overwhelming job load and stress load, so I have been reaching out the Associate Dean to get extensions to help get the students through." This sentiment is echoed by William:  "A lot of them are educators, so now they're feeling the pressure of having to go back to school, and they don’t want to go. Most of them have just told me outright they don't want to go, but they have to go. So, as a result they're being asked to do things they haven't had as job responsibilities before, and now they're having to do them and that's distracting from their time."  Michelle also offered that, "The students that I have that are in schools, whether in a leadership position or they're classroom teachers, they got a lot put on their plate in one day." She continued, "A complete overhaul of how they were teaching. Learning new modes of delivery while also worrying about their own families. They were just overloaded."  Michelle also noted that while classroom teachers seem to have more time to work on their work since they are not doing all the ancillary tasks required of teachers when in a school, doctoral students who are school administrators seem to be busier.  Janice echoed these observations: "For example, I've got a principal of a Title I school. She is very smart, she is a good writer, she is totally capable of doing this, but her workload starting with trying to figure out how to get everyone online in March and now trying to figure how to get them all back and teachers into PD, it is a mess."

Stress appeared to be both a factor and an impact of the ongoing situation for many doctoral students.  Elizabeth surmises that, "People are under huge amounts of stress."  Elizabeth has a doctoral student teaching at a boys lockup in Atlanta. COVID went through there in July. She also has a student who is an assistant director at a homeless shelter. In March, homeless people were dying. She also noted, “"Somebody's mother-in-law had COVID and died." "There are these definite situations that are just heavy." "It just becomes more personal. You do become closer."  Similarly, Michelle stated that, "Stress at work, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of fear. I don’t think that's unique to online students, I think a lot of people around the world are feeling the same things. A lot of fear and uncertainty is the biggest change I've seen."  William also noted the universal aspect of stress, in that "It's just a lot of stress for everybody. I see it in a lot of faculty."

**Additional Themes:**

In addition to the four major themes that emerged from the interviews, some smaller themes and quotes from Dissertation Chairs were notable and could provide insight and reflection for future research and practice on this topic.

Some Chairs noted what they felt was an increased desire for human connection during isolation and crisis. As Kate stated, “There is a desire to connect with other students.” Kate described that she has a cohort group of students who are about at the same phase of the process.  They don’t always connect, but “it’s nice for them to know that there is somebody at the same place and having the same struggles.”  Kate also noted that seh believes that COVID has made students want to do higher quality work (and not just finish up quickly).  The students want to “go further afterwards” and expand on their work and have others expand on their work.  “It’s become a more global thing for them” and that the world is a smaller place for them.  More creativity and sharing may be occurring.  We should never forget “that we are really one people in the world and that we are able to share what we create.  It’s a beautiful thing to be able to share.”

The theme of desire for human connection and a greater purpose also aligns with what Evelyn described as supporting the mission of the online university where the Chairs teach.  Evelyn stated that she believes that everything Chairs do is to support the mission and vision of the university.  It’s possible to go above and beyond and to exceed those expectations.  Evelyn also mentioned that doctoral students who have transferred or changed Chairs face specific issues and struggles and that she has always been (both now and previously, before COVID) especially careful to do outreach to these students and provide additional support (including emotional support).  Michelle noted the practical aspect of the university’s mission and logistical set-up: "Because they are enrolled in an online program, they're kinda experts on how to navigate course rooms anyway. They are uniquely more qualified than someone at a brick and mortar." She noted that she thinks her students that are teachers understand their own students and what they are going through being online now because they know what they need in an online environment to be successful.  As William explained, "Looking at the big picture, I think we as a university are right on target. We're light years ahead of everybody else, and I think we are doing the right things."  Going further, Evelyn notes that students are asking about careers in online teaching (whereas they hadn’t asked so much before).  Some want to make a career change and appear to be working harder due to that motivation.  The students are considering teaching online once they finish the degree.

Some final thoughts from the Dissertation Chairs brought up general ideas that are important to consider.  Most notably, the aspect of trauma-informed practice emerged as a sub-theme, related to social-emotional aspects.  According to Janice, "I think I've become closer to some because when you go through a tragedy with people. Out of tragedy we support each other and find strength." She noted she has gotten "some beautiful notes and write ups" in dissertations about "how her support and understanding was what got them through."  Evelyn noted that she will provide whatever support she can to help students have a successful outcome with the program.  She makes the assumption that the students are there because they want to be successful in the degree and the outcomes/career.  Evelyn said that she also  makes the assumption that everybody has someone they care about that has been impacted by the pandemic in some way or that they are afraid that will be impacted in some way.  That assumption helps the Chair to be “even more understanding…even more patient…try to be more kind…I want to be even more humane because I feel that that is what we all owe each other at this time” Evelyn noted that this idea goes beyond the students, and even with examples of neighbors, driving, at the store, etc. in her own life.  She is trying to be more patient and kind overall in life during COVID.  “We all have this horrific, unpredictable thing in our lives, that can sometimes take over our emotions and our behaviors and to say and do things that we might not otherwise do.”

Relating Evelyn’s philosophy back to many of the Chairs’ feelings on their work with doctoral students during COVID-19, William explains that th, “Working with students, giving them feedback, helping them reach their goals.”  Referencing now versus the past, "Nothing really has changed as far as my role goes….There is only one thing that has really changed. I see more students in distress."  William explains that, "You have to be not only their chair, but their mentor, and you have to see them in their situation along with their academic situation, and I think that it has shifted more toward their situation or maybe it's intensified a bit."