



## **College Women's Establishing of Peer Social-relationships and Communicating about Pandemic-related Political Identities and Topics**

**Tara Hembrough**

University of the Incarnate Word, United States, [hembroug@uiwtx.edu](mailto:hembroug@uiwtx.edu)

**Lindsey Mixon**

University of Oklahoma, United States, [lindsey.a.mixon-1@ou.edu](mailto:lindsey.a.mixon-1@ou.edu)

This mixed-methods study examines two research areas concerning whether U.S. women college students, compared with men, enrolled in online classes during the pandemic suffered from stress regarding their ability to socialize and negotiate a community/national political issue(s) affecting them negatively academically in terms of their grade point average and course outcomes, as well as whether the women would experience a sense of belonging and camaraderie with classmates by discussing topics impacting their identities and circumstances in terms of their individual and communal, social-relational, health, and financial pandemic contexts, which might also influence them negatively academically as stressors linked to their course outcomes and progress. Conducted in a rural, geographically marginalized area, the study implements survey and short-answer question instruments and utilizes an exploratory case-study design and a convergent-parallel strategy assessing 188 women and 188 men participants, including racial/ethnic minority and low socio-economic status (SES) women, with women's median age of 23. Of women and men surveyed, the former reported statistically significantly higher stress levels than men connected to the women's need to socialize and tackle pandemic-oriented community and national political issues affecting their lives and statuses, which subsequently influenced their academic progress. Overall, the pandemic damaged women, especially racial/ethnic minorities, more than men, with women having higher stress rates revolving around their need for socializing (59% versus 33%) and addressing political issues (54% versus 32%), stressors hampering the women's academic outcomes and status, as well as some experiencing additional stress regarding health and financial concerns. In response to these settings, 21% of women (n = 40) desired to discuss controversial topics, such as their pandemic stressors and related experiences in the classroom, including the pandemic's political consequences for themselves, to promote self-expression, forge bonds, and seek and provide assistance in addressing all classmates' academic, personal, and community needs.

**Keywords:** women college students, racial/ethnic minority students, low SES students, pandemic stressors, political discussions, classmate engagement, critical thinking

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the American Psychological Association's ([APA], 2020) COVID-19 pandemic study comparing women and men college student populations regarding their stressors, as well as Aristovnik and others' (2020) international pandemic study of college students, some women, but especially those with a racially/ethnically minoritized or low socio-economic status (SES), reported greater physiological, psychological, social-relational, and financial stressors and higher associated stress levels than men, a context of concern for the authors' study of U.S. Southwestern women college students' stressors and the women's associated academic need for peer belonging and the discussion of pandemic-related political topics during this time. In Wang and others' (2020) pandemic study of U.S. Southwestern university students' stressors affecting their school experience within this period, many, but especially women, felt hopeless and alienated because they did not have "normal" pre-pandemic access to their classmates. Meanwhile, in Hembrough's (2024) and Hembrough and Cavanaugh's (2022) U.S. Southwestern pandemic studies of rurally located college students, including racial/ethnic minority and low SES students, some women suffered from stressors and stress levels connected with their health, relationships, finances, and academic enrollment, including their expressed need for closeness and interaction with classmates. Internationally, Al-Rasheed's study (2021) of Saudia Arabian college women found that these students' experiencing of their newly wrought pandemic settings and circumstances raised their stress levels for personal, family, community, and academic factors, thus disrupting their educational outcomes and goals, even more so for those with prior mental health issues and feelings of isolation. Moreover, in Delavin and Barazon's (2022) pandemic study of Filipina college women's stress-related conditions, 44% were worried about their inability to socialize with friends on campus; 43% were lonely; 36% suffered from generalized stress; and 30% were concerned about their inability to leave the house to attend future classes in person.

In terms of experiencing classroom belonging and camaraderie, peer support, persistence, and matriculation, women as a key but peripheralized population hold an important place in academia whose educational outcomes should not be overlooked, especially in moving into a post-pandemic era. Along with other national and international efforts to address the situation, the APA (2020) reported that U.S. university administrators had declared that meeting marginalized students' needs, including those of women and racial/ethnic and low SES minorities, was to take center stage. In the U.S., more women students enroll in and graduate from college than men (Saadat et al., 2022), but the former also have a lower adjustment rate in transitioning to university life (Martin, 2017). According to Active Minds' (2020) pandemic study of U.S. college students during this time, more women, including racial/ethnic and low SES minorities, requested support for their mental health issues and personal, family, and academic problems and expressed a linked desire for belonging, support, and campus forums for communicating about themselves and their needs than previously. Furthermore, as an example of a U.S. study of college students' classes being transitioned online during the pandemic with a negative outcome, Chu (2020) found that many students, including women and minorities, did not interact with or have an adequate opportunity to engage with their classmates in their courses. In line with such

instances of students experiencing low-impact, pedagogical settings and scenarios within the pandemic, Chu (2020) called upon international faculty to identify and implement new curricula and pedagogical practices better accommodating and benefitting their students in terms of camaraderie and peer support, including assisting them in raising valuable discussions related to their lives. Notably, according to Active Minds' (2020) study, some U.S. students, including women, desired the opportunity to discuss their beliefs about and experiences with the pandemic with their peers. Moreover, according to Gallup's (2020) pandemic survey of U.S. college students, including women, most participants believed that their universities should be locations for their conversing about current topics to encourage community, analytical thinking, and political awareness.

Altogether, COVID-19 pandemic-affiliated international studies address questions about the type and nature of college women's connected individual and communal health, social-relational, and financial stressors, as well as their impact upon students' academic outcomes, including their need for experiencing belonging and peer support, and enacting of discussions about political topics related to their identity. Considering these points, the authors utilized an exploratory case study to compare college women with men, including racial/ethnic and low SES minorities, in the rural Southwest during the pandemic. As research areas, the authors explored women's inclination and capacity, compared with men's, for building belonging, relational bonds, and peer support structures in the online classroom as an important pedagogical design in establishing a classroom dynamic bolstering students' conversations about their potential pandemic stressors, backgrounds, values, and academic experiences, including in terms of pandemic-connected political events. For the study, the authors aimed to investigate whether women who decided to communicate about how the pandemic affected them in terms of their potential personal and communal stressors and the related political issues affiliated with them might also desire to participate in class discussions with peers about this context in order to locate and construct a stronger sense of belonging and camaraderie, strengthen their critical thinking skills, and raise dialogues about significant, controversial pandemic topics in doing so, with women students' self-expression and exploration being valuable pedagogical outcomes that were overlooked, undermined, or necessarily jettisoned during the pandemic as a fraught time influenced by numerous constraints.

## **Literature Review**

### **Students' Social-relational, Health, Financial, and Academic Pandemic Stressors**

Women students, including racial/ethnic minorities and those with a low SES, were impacted more negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic than men, especially due to the women's lack of adequate or "normal, as in pre-pandemic" relationships with their classmates with whom they might discuss their social-relational, health, financial, and corresponding academic stressors and also communicate about how the pandemic affected them politically regarding their individual, familial, and communal ideologies and statuses. According to the APA (2020), as top pandemic stressors for all U.S. students, both women and men were impacted by their social-relational ability to secure

and maintain relationships and be economically viable while also worrying about their health and that of others. However, during the pandemic, women still fared worse than men in terms of their stress regarding these categories, just as they had pre-pandemic, with this result pointing to the women's potentially affiliated wish to discuss their pandemic stressors, identities, and situations with their classmates to some degree in engaging in politically based pandemic dialogues that might arise during their coursework. Social-rationally, Hembrough and Cavanagh (2022) found that racial/ethnic, low SES, and geographically minoritized, U.S. Southwestern students, including a majority of women, similarly rated their top stressor as tied to their ability to be present with others, including campus peers. Comparably, Delavin and Barazon (2022), exploring family relationships as a social-relational stressor, reported that 36% of Filipina students were stressed about their capacity for maintaining regular family relationships during the pandemic, a finding pointing to women students' greater need for classmates' support by way of compensation. Alternately, in Ajayi's (2021) pandemic study of U.S. student mothers versus their peers comprised of both women and men, child-affiliated and non-child-affiliated, mothers of children under age 18 experienced the most profound mental health impacts of all groups due to their multiple roles as parents, employees, and students. Significantly, greater than 70% of American college students are women, and 62% are single, yet only 28% of student mothers graduate from college within six years, compared to 57% without children, a phenomenon leaving many student mothers feeling alone and minimized by their peers. Furthermore, racial/ethnic minority students, representing the largest number of student mothers, also describe being shunned for their life choices. For some women, various pandemic-affiliated social-relational, health, and financial stressors and situations damaged their ability to form relationships with their classmates and hold valuable conversations with them, thus negatively contributing to the women's academic outcomes and progress.

According to the APA (2020), during the pandemic, many U.S. students, including women, found that fulfilling their academic responsibilities concerning their course curriculum was a stressor, and most also faced obstacles in attending classes online and completing their assignments. Comparably, in Delavin and Barazon's (2022) study, most Filipina students also believed that the pandemic hampered their learning and career readiness, with 30% reporting stress about finding a job related to their major. Meanwhile, in López-Castro and others' (2021) study of U.S. Northeastern college students, including women, 31% were unable to attend school for weeks due to the pandemic, and in Aucejo and others' (2020) U.S. Southwestern study, some students, including women, worried about their grade point average, 12% changed their majors, and 11% withdrew from classes. As a social-relational pandemic concern, many students missed interacting with their peers in person similarly. In Al-Rasheed's (2021) study, 85% of Saudia Arabian women students were desirous of in-person interactions in general, and 38% longed to participate in their traditional, brick-and-mortar, campus environment. Furthermore, in Mahyoob's (2020) pandemic study of Saudi Arabian college students, even when the faculty utilized distance learning forums, including class and individualized Zoom meetings and breakout-room discussions, students' performance and learning outcomes were impacted negatively. In Lee and colleagues

(2021) study of South Korean women students likewise, most deemed their transition to online learning to be problematic because they could not engage in a “typical” college experience with their classmates, leading to their expected emotional growth. Significantly, according to Martin (2017), U.S. women students often experience greater comfort than do men in college in being with their classmates of both sexes and all races/ethnicities while women battling social isolation problems have a lower chance of being retained at their institution.

### **Students’ Peer Belonging, Camaraderie, and Pandemic and Political Dialogues**

With the pandemic’s outset, according to Hazaymeh’s (2021) study of United Arab Emirates college students, including women; Delavin and Barazon’s (2022) study of Filipina women students; and Lee and colleagues’ (2021) study of South Korean women students, during this time, women desired to experience a sense of community in their classroom and a platform with which to connect with peers in order to feel that they belonged. They also requested pedagogical practices and curricula designed to aid in their success and allow them to be heard in their online courses in discussing subject matter of interest to them since they were separated physically from their classmates. According to the APA (2020), during the pandemic in the U.S., over three-fourths of students, including women, worried about what the future would hold, yet teachers who fostered greater classroom interactions relevant to their course design helped to decrease their students’ stress and anxiety. Indeed, in the U.S. Southwest, Wang and colleagues (2020) reported that only 15% of students, including women, did not wish to communicate about the subject of their mental health concerns, and three-fourths had procured pandemic-oriented information from various sources, both reputable and un reputable, on their own to inform them, a practice often more damaging than beneficial to them psychologically, with this setting pointing to many students’ openness to holding pandemic conversations in their classes aligned with their and their classmates’ identities. Ostensibly, some students’ lack of greater information about the pandemic or their lowered ability to explore it was linked, in part, to the media’s shifting presentation of pandemic subject matter and lack of clarity on the topic. Yet, according to Carpenter and Dunn (2022), faculty who can assist students in broaching the current issues of their time, such as the pandemic, promote their higher rates of analytical thinking, free speech, and civic participation while students sharing stories about their own stressful and even traumatic life events may benefit from reflecting upon them and possibly instigating change. Notably, many students enjoy engaging in dialogues about controversial topics, including those tied to political and social justice issues, a facet of most pandemic-oriented conversations. Nonetheless, during the pandemic in U.S. higher education, Gallup (2020) reported that of students, including women, surveyed, over half believed that the pandemic exacerbated existing divisions amongst political groups, and that their university had quelled their sharing of their belief systems, with almost three quarters of students viewing their ability to speak freely as vital to a democratic system, and the students hoping to converse about political elections (65%), politics (59%), and gender and/or race issues (40%).

The literature paints a picture of college students’ reactions to personal, familial, and communal pandemic stressors linked to their social-relationships, health, finances, and

resulting academic outcomes, and of these, a handful feature women and their individualized needs. However, the research remains limited, especially for women, including racially/ethnically minoritized and low SES students, in the U.S.'s Southwestern rural region as a uniquely geographically disadvantaged area where students possess fewer resources and desire greater social-relational connections than their peers nationally (see Hembrough, 2024). This article investigates Southwestern women students' potential experiencing of COVID-19 pandemic stressors involving their ability to formulate and maintain supportive classmate relationships in their online classrooms in order to navigate valuable discussions about stressful political issues for themselves individually and communally, as well as about their academic progress. As a call to action, the article also presents faculty with pedagogical design methods involving class discussion and critical-thinking practices of potential value for those implementing such strategies in their own courses to reach students dealing with similar post-pandemic and other crises attached to current political issues. For the study, the authors asked these research questions: During a pandemic time, such as with COVID-19, do women students in online classes suffer stress regarding their ability to *socialize* and deal with *a community/national political issue(s)* affecting them negatively academically regarding their *grade point average* and *course outcomes*, compared with men? If so, do women, as well as their male peers, also wish to experience belonging and camaraderie with their classmates by discussing a set of diverse political topics influencing their identities in terms of their individual and communal, social-relational, health, and financial pandemic stressors and contexts, which theoretically would impact them academically as factors linked to their course outcomes and academic progress?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Methods, Research Site, and Sample Demographics**

With Institutional Review Board approval, the authors elected to engage in an exploratory case study and utilize a mixed-methods design and convergent-parallel strategy to support them in the data collection and evaluation process. The authors amassed and analyzed students' responses to quantitative survey questions and coinciding qualitative, open-ended, short-answer questions as data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By implementing an exploratory case study, the authors sought to understand women students' range of stressors and impacted classroom experiences during the pandemic as a present-day phenomenon without direct comparison. In utilizing a mixed-methods approach and a convergent-parallel design, the authors gathered two distinct data sources (numerical and short-answer commentary) and evaluated them together in order to produce greater detail in their findings, with the Likert scale responses providing a basis for the short-answer commentary, which the authors coded with a grounded approach. The authors created study credibility and reliability by considering the prior studies reviewed, selected an adequate participant sample using GPower 3.1.9.7 software analysis, and administered and taught writing courses with a discussion element or were connected to this aspect in terms of their positionality. Based upon the study's aims, the authors explored students' identities and pandemic stressors attached to their social-relationships, health, finances, and classroom experience and how these influenced their potential desire to converse about pandemic-

related politics in their courses, with a focus on women students, especially racial/ethnic minority and low SES women. The study utilized questions from Hembrough's (2019) *Scale of Pandemic Stress Factors for College Students* in Hembrough and Cavanagh (2022) and built upon Lester's (2014) "Stressful Life Events Checklist" for college students. The survey offered 122 Likert scale questions, with students' responses ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree" and linked open-ended questions for further feedback. The authors used the student commentary to render codes in NVivo 14's qualitative software. Additionally, the authors utilized SPSS 27 software to create statistical findings, with large stressor differences reported through independent samples *t*-test analyses. For the data collection process, participants made an online, anonymous SONA Systems account to participate voluntarily in the study and utilized Alchemer, an anonymous online survey tool, to engage in it and sign the online consent form indicating ethical clearance and protocol. Participants were awarded compensatory points for their chosen course. As the study's timeline, in the U.S., the pandemic began to affect college campuses in January 2020, and many closed their doors and moved students' coursework online by March. Such was the case in the present study. The authors surveyed participants about their potential stressors and experiences both concerning the six-month span pre-pandemic from August to December 2019 and when they participated in the study during the pandemic and its aftermath sometime between April 2020 and April 2022, a data collection timeline allowing for greater inclusion of diverse participants, including racially/ethnically minoritized and low SES women from a wide age bracket.

The authors conducted the study at a public university serving low SES, rural students, where only over a quarter ever graduate, and some women, as a key but peripheralized population, experience persistence problems. During the pandemic, the university provided directions for masking and COVID-19 reporting on course syllabi, and participants took classes online. During the semester of study participation, students were enrolled in at least one course with a class discussion element as a curricular goal addressing their reading and writing assignments. The study was comprised of undergraduates, including freshmen to seniors, and a small number of master's students, and 188 women and 188 men participated. Women were between the ages of 18 to 65 ( $M = 26$ ,  $SD = 8.83$ ), and 54% ( $n = 101$ ) identified as Caucasian, while 47% ( $n = 87$ ) identified as a racial/ethnic minority, including 31% ( $n = 59$ ) Native American, 9% ( $n = 16$ ) Hispanic/Latina, 4% ( $n = 7$ ) African American, and 3% ( $n = 5$ ) Asian/Pacific Islander. Single and separated/divorced women were 57% ( $n = 107$ ), and married and cohabiting women were 43% ( $n = 81$ ). The average mother had two children. Women reported an average annual household income of \$46,000 to \$60,000. Women were registered for various courses with a class-discussion pedagogical element and majored in fields such as business, accounting, English, and psychology, with 82% ( $n = 154$ ) enrolled full-time. They held positions in occupations such as retail, education, and hospitality. Men had similar demographics to women, with 88% ( $n = 166$ ) enrolled full-time. Refer to Table 1.

Table 1  
Men and women students' demographic characteristics

	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
<b>Ethnicity/Race</b>					
Women	Caucasian 54(101)	Native American 31(59)	African American 4(7)	Asian/Pacific Islander 3(5)	Hispanic/Latina 9(16)
Men	Caucasian 57(108)	Native American 18(34)	African American 11(21)	Asian/Pacific Islander 2(3)	Hispanic/Latino 12(22)
<b>Age</b>					
Women	17-19 16(31)	20-29 62(117)	30-39 13(25)	40-49 4(8)	50+ 4(7)
Men	17-19 16(31)	20-29 62(117)	30-39 14(26)	40-49 4(7)	50+ 4(7)
<b>Marital status</b>					
Women	Married 31(59)	Cohabiting 12(22)	Separate/Divorced 3(5)	Single 54(102)	
Men	Married 19(36)	Cohabiting 7(14)	Separate/Divorced 2(3)	Single 71(134)	
<b>Financially responsible for children under 18</b>					
Women	None 66(124)	1 child 11(21)	2 children 13(25)	3 children 6(11)	4+ children 4(7)
Men	None 81(152)	1 child 7(14)	2 children 7(13)	3 children 3(5)	4+ children 2(3)
<b>Annual household income</b>					
Women	\$0-15,000 9(17)	\$16,000-30,000 13(25)	\$31,000-45,000 12(22)	\$46,000-60,000 20(37)	\$61,000-76,000+ 45(84)
Men	\$0-15,000 12(22)	\$16,000-30,000 16(30)	\$31,000-45,000 14(26)	\$46,000-60,000 11(21)	\$61,000-76,000+ 46(86)

Note. Women,  $n = 188$ ; Men,  $n = 188$ .

## FINDINGS

### Women's Social-Relational and Political Stressors Linked to Academic Outcomes

The study examined two research questions, the first exploring whether women, compared with men, enrolled in online classes during the pandemic suffered stress regarding their ability to *socialize* and tackle a *community/national political issue(s)* affecting them academically regarding their *grade point average* and *course outcomes*. The second question investigated whether women experiencing stress about their need to *socialize* with classmates and thus find belonging and who, separately, were dealing with a *community and national political issue(s)* impacting their identities and circumstances regarding their individual and communal, social-relational, health, financial, and academic contexts, might wish to discuss these issues with their peers as a pedagogical approach bolstering their course outcomes and academic progress.

As the first finding, during the pandemic, women in online classes experienced higher stress levels across all categories and factors than men. Over half of women worried about their ability to *socialize* with others, compared with a third of men (59%,  $n = 110$ ,  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.40$  versus 33%,  $n = 62$ ,  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), with a difference of 26% points. Additionally, more than half of women were concerned about the implications of various pandemic-connected political issues that were affecting or could



affect them, compared to under a third of men (54%,  $n = 102$ ,  $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.35$  versus 32%,  $n = 60$ ,  $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ), with a difference of 22% points. In the authors' coding of women's survey short-answer questions related to a *socializing issue(s)* as a pandemic stress factor, some women noted *their inability to maintain friendships* ( $n = 6$ ), *loneliness* ( $n = 6$ ), *absent support system* ( $n = 4$ ), *feelings of containment due to quarantining and isolating measures* ( $n = 9$ ), and *difficulty moving to an online course format where they could build student bonds* ( $n = 1$ ). Alternately, according to the authors' coding of short-answer questions concerning women's experiencing of a *community/national political issue(s)* as a stressor, some reported being worried about *the presidential election* ( $n = 8$ ), *government leadership* ( $n = 10$ ), *area homeless people's health* ( $n = 2$ ), and *the pandemic's politicization in the news as affecting their lives* ( $n = 6$ ). Resultingly, as pandemic-connected academic stressors associated with the first two factors, students also reported stress about their *grade point average* and *coursework issues* tied to the difficulties they had encountered with their online classes. However, more women were stressed about these academic stressors than men, with nearly half of women suffering stress concerning their *grade point average*, compared to over a quarter of men (41%,  $n = 77$ ,  $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.56$  versus 28%,  $n = 53$ ,  $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ), a difference of 13% points, and over a fifth of women and less than a fifth of men being concerned about a *coursework issue(s)* (23%,  $n = 43$ ,  $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.54$  versus 15%,  $n = 29$ ,  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ), with a difference of 8% points. According to the women's coded short-answer responses, their obstacles included their technological, personal, and motivational capacity for attending their classes and submitting their assignments online in having the necessary available digital devices and wireless internet connection, as well as the time and stamina required in order to meet their academic obligations; their ability to communicate clearly and effectively with their teachers and classmates concerning their assignments and lives; and their possibility for attaining their course goals in terms of their persistence and academic success.

Pre-pandemic to pandemic, the stressors that the women experienced and the women versus men experienced can also be compared. Pre-pandemic to pandemic, all of the women's stressors grew for the factors of *socializing* (32%,  $n = 60$ ,  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.36$  to 59%,  $n = 110$ ,  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), up 27%; *a political issue(s)*, (42%,  $n = 79$ ,  $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.35$  versus 54%,  $n = 102$ ,  $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), up 12%; *grade point average* (35%,  $n = 65$ ,  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.54$  versus 41%,  $n = 77$ ,  $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ), up 6%; and *a coursework issue(s)* (14%,  $n = 27$ ,  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.36$  versus 23%,  $n = 43$ ,  $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), up 9%. Furthermore, during the pre-pandemic period, women, compared with men, also experienced higher stress rates for the first three aforementioned stress factors, except regarding *coursework* concerns, where the difference was less than 1% favoring men. During the pre-pandemic, comparing women to men regarding *socializing*, 32% of women ( $n = 60$ ,  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) versus 19% of men ( $n = 36$ ,  $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) experienced stress, with women having a 13% higher stress rate than their male peers, and concerning *a political issue(s)*, 42% of women ( $n = 79$ ,  $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) versus 22% of men ( $n = 41$ ,  $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) experienced stress, with women having a 20% higher rate than men. Academically, *grade point average* was also a concern for 35% of women ( $n = 65$ ,  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD =$

1.54) versus 23% of men ( $n = 44$ ,  $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), with women having a 12% higher rate, but concerning *a coursework issue(s)*, women's and men's stress rates were nearly on par (14.4%,  $n = 27$ ,  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.36$  versus 14.9%,  $n = 28$ ,  $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). Significantly, pre-pandemic, women's stress rates were between 12% ( $n = 21$ ) and 20% ( $n = 38$ ) higher than men's for the first three factors but most noticeably regarding *political* concerns, with a difference of 20% ( $n = 38$ ).

Additionally, pre-pandemic to pandemic, racial/ethnic minority and low SES women's growth rate for the stress factors can also be highlighted. Compared with 54% ( $n = 101$ ) of Caucasian women, 46% ( $n = 87$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women, with 31% ( $n = 59$ ) Native American, 9% ( $n = 16$ ) Hispanic/Latina, 4% ( $n = 7$ ) African American, and 3% ( $n = 5$ ) Asian/Pacific Islander, suffered from higher stress rates for all four factors than their Caucasian peers in terms of *socializing* (61% minority versus 56% Caucasian), a difference of 5%; *a political issue(s)* (60% minority versus 50% Caucasian), a difference of 10%; *grade point average* (43% minority versus 40% Caucasian), a difference of 3%; and *coursework*, (34% minority versus 21% Caucasian), a difference of 13%. Notably, as the racial minority women's top three pandemic stressors, 55% to 61% reported concerns about their *grade point average*, *politics*, and *socializing*, compared to 47% to 56% of Caucasians. Over a third (34%) of racial/ethnic minority women also experienced stress about *a coursework issue(s)*, compared with just over a fifth (21%) of Caucasians. Proceeding, the stress rates of women from lower versus higher socioeconomic backgrounds can also be compared. Low SES women, representing 9% ( $N = 17$ ) of women overall, reported having higher stress levels related to all four factors, compared with their higher-income peers (90%,  $N = 168$ ) in terms of *socializing* (71% low versus 57% higher-income), a difference of 14%; *a political issue(s)* (77% low versus 51% higher-income), a difference of 26%; *grade point average* (59% low versus 43% higher-income), a difference of 16%; and *coursework* (53% low versus 25% higher-income), a difference of 28%.

See Table 2 for women's and men's pre-pandemic and pandemic social-relational, political, academic, health, and financial stressors. Of note, although 53% ( $n = 99$ ) of women experienced a health stressor and 50% ( $n = 54$ ) suffered from a financial stressor, which also foreseeably influenced their academic outcomes negatively, in terms of providing a fuller discussion of these relationships for the two factors, these categories add interest to the article but do not represent the study's larger focus.

2

Table  
Women's and men's social-relational, academic, health, and financial stressors

Stress categories/factors	Experienced pre-pandemic		Experienced during the pandemic		Rate of change/number of increase or decrease	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )
<b>Social-relational/political</b>						
Socializing issue(s)	19.2(36)	31.9(60)	33.0(62)	58.5(110)	71.9(26)	83.4(50)
Community/national political issue(s)	21.8(41)	42.0(79)	31.9(60)	54.3(102)	46.3(19)	29.3(23)
<b>Academic</b>						
Grade point average	23.4(44)	34.6(65)	28.2(53)	41.0(77)	20.5(9)	18.5(12)
Coursework issue(s)	14.9(28)	14.4(27)	15.4(29)	22.9(43)	3.4(1)	59.0(16)
<b>Health</b>						
Psychological condition	18.1(34)	45.7(86)	20.7(39)	52.7(99)	14.4(5)	15.3(13)
Sleeping issue	16.5(31)	26.6(50)	22.9(43)	44.2(83)	38.8(12)	66.2(33)
Existential issue	18.1(34)	26.1(49)	22.3(42)	38.8(73)	23.2(8)	48.7(24)
Family member(s) injury/illness	15.4(29)	19.7(37)	19.2(36)	36.7(69)	24.7(7)	86.3(32)
Personal injury/illness	13.8(26)	21.8(41)	18.6(35)	34.6(65)	34.8(9)	58.7(24)
Possibility of own death	13.8(26)	19.7(37)	19.2(36)	31.4(59)	39.1(10)	59.4(22)
Family member's death	13.3(25)	18.1(34)	15.4(29)	27.1(51)	15.8(4)	49.7(17)
<b>Financial</b>						
Reduction in income	21.8(41)	31.9(60)	31.4(59)	50.0(94)	44.0(18)	56.7(34)
Job conflict	17.6(33)	31.4(59)	30.0(56)	43.6(82)	70.5(23)	38.9(23)

Note. *N* = 376; Women, *n* = 188; Men, *n* = 188. Psychological conditions refer to stress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicidality.

As a subsequent step in comparing women and men during the pre-pandemic versus pandemic period for the four main stressors, a socializing issue(s), political issue(s), grade point average, and a coursework issue(s), there was a statistically significant difference for each factor according to independent samples *t*-test results, with the women experiencing higher stress rates than the men categorically. See Table 3.

Table 3

Statistically significant difference for students' four stressors measured for women versus men during the pre-pandemic and pandemic period

Stress factors	Experienced pre-pandemic		Experienced during pandemic		Independent samples <i>t</i> -test results comparing men to women	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Pre-pandemic	During COVID-19 pandemic
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)		
Socializing issue(s)	2.37 (1.38)	2.96 (1.44)	2.85 (1.49)	3.69 (1.40)	$t(98) = 3.15, p = .002,$ 95th C.I. = .11 to .52	$t(119) = 4.17, p = <.001,$ 95th C.I. = .20 to .57
Community/national political issue(s)	2.56 (1.42)	3.29 (1.30)	2.86 (1.51)	3.66 (1.35)	$t(122) = 4.45, p = <.001,$ 95th C.I. = .22 to .58	$t(125) = 4.53, p = <.001,$ 95th C.I. = .22 to .58
Grade point average	2.57 (1.49)	3.06 (1.50)	2.70 (1.53)	3.26 (1.53)	$t(113) = 2.54, p = .01,$ 95th C.I. = .05 to .42	$t(118) = 2.90, p = .004,$ 95th C.I. = .08 to .45
Coursework issue(s)	2.06 (1.34)	2.18 (1.36)	2.07 (1.38)	2.52 (1.54)	$t(110) = 1.03, p = .30,$ 95th C.I. = -.09 to .28	$t(111) = 2.14, p = .04,$ 95th C.I. = .02 to .39

Note.  $N = 376$ ; Women,  $n = 188$ ; Men,  $n = 188$ . A few students did not respond to all survey questions, which left different participant numbers for some factors. However, this did not meet the critical cut-off rate for the participants' exclusion in the study.

### Women's Desire to Discuss the Pandemic and Related Politics in Their Courses

During the pandemic, more women than men suffered from stress regarding their need to *socialize* and thus experience belonging and camaraderie with classmates, as well as their worrying about *community/national politics* influencing their identities, circumstances, and academic progress. As a second finding, a segment of women, with only a slightly smaller number of women than men (21%,  $n = 40$  versus 25%,  $n = 46$ ), also wished to discuss the pandemic's impacts upon themselves in terms of raising controversial, political topics in the classroom. Such related subject matter included students' individual and communal, social-relational, health, and financial contexts, which affected them negatively academically regarding their *grade point average* and *coursework* as stressors. Nonetheless, despite some students' expressed willingness to communicate about these topics in their classes, many did not experience the opportunity to speak or write about their pandemic stressors or related political topics in their courses even if they wanted to. According to students' reporting of events, only 39% ( $n = 146$ ), 81 women and 65 men, were enrolled in at least one class that semester of the study where a teacher presented material or raised a question about a pandemic-oriented issue once minimally through a class discussion, reading or video assignment, or writing task aside from the requisite need to cover university protocols about masking and reporting measures. Yet despite some students' apparent lack of experiencing teacher-led conversations about pandemic subjects, 42% ( $n = 158$ ) of students, 93 women and 65 men, decided to assume the initiative to tackle pandemic-linked discourses on their own in their classes, including community/national political issues. Of students surveyed about *their possible desire to talk or write about controversial topics in their classes*, 21% ( $n = 40$ ) of women, both racial/ethnic minorities (49%,  $n = 20$ ) and Caucasians (44%,  $n = 20$ ), and 25% ( $n = 46$ ) of men, valued this option as a course design, with only a slightly higher number of

men favoring it than women, despite women's greater stress concerning their wish to socialize with classmates during the pandemic. According to the women's coded short-answer responses of those favoring discussions of controversial topics in classes, including talking or writing about pandemic-oriented political issues, the women reported wanting to do so in order to *gain a deeper understanding of other people's viewpoints* ( $n = 16$ ); *think more critically about their own beliefs* ( $n = 9$ ); and *be part of a forum where they could express their opinions in a moderated setting* ( $n = 13$ ).

Proceeding with the study's second finding, 181 participants, 95 men and 86 women, including just under half (47%,  $n = 41$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and 45% ( $n = 45$ ) of Caucasians, opted to respond to six additional survey questions offering further feedback about their five rationales in favor of and one rationale opposing their coverage of controversial political topics connected to the pandemic in their classes that semester, with the women's coded, short-answer responses providing additional context. As the first rationale for conversing about pandemic-related political topics in students' courses, according to both women and men, some wanted to discuss *how the pandemic affected them and/or their family*, with 22% ( $n = 19$ ) of women, including 22% ( $n = 9$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and the rest Caucasian, and 16% ( $n = 15$ ) of men agreeing with this statement. As a second rationale for desiring to cover pandemic-oriented issues, 17% of women ( $n = 15$ ), including 20% ( $n = 8$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and the others Caucasian, and 17% of men ( $n = 16$ ) felt that *their teacher and classmates would view their opinion about the pandemic as worthy of expression*. According to the authors' coding for this question for women, they believed that *their professors and fellow students consistently supported them and would value the women's opinions* ( $n = 8$ ) and *saw holding class discussions as beneficial for everyone considering the confinement the pandemic caused* ( $n = 6$ ). As the third rationale contributing to students' wish to engage in pandemic-focused conversations, 22% ( $n = 19$ ) of women, including 37% ( $n = 15$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and the rest Caucasian, and 26% ( $n = 25$ ) of men *remained intrigued by pandemic subject matter*. According to coding for the women, they did not feel bored by continued pandemic discussions because they argued that *there was always new information to be covered* ( $n = 4$ ), *the pandemic would affect society for years to come*, and *conversations about the pandemic would help students prepare for future public health events* ( $n = 9$ ). As a fourth rationale for communicating about pandemic topics, 33% ( $n = 28$ ) of women, including 37% ( $n = 15$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and the other Caucasian, and 16% of men ( $n = 15$ ) believed similarly that *pandemic dialogues were instrumental to concerns related to their major or coursework*. In terms of women's coded answers, they believed that *the pandemic affected nearly every career field* ( $n = 3$ ) and *impacted the children and families they served in their jobs* ( $n = 10$ ). As a fifth rationale in favor of pandemic conversations, 47% ( $n = 40$ ) of women, including 49% ( $n = 20$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and the rest Caucasian, and 29% ( $n = 27$ ) of men viewed the pandemic *as a valuable current event to cover*. Coding for the women indicated that they viewed the pandemic as an important situation about which to converse *to learn important lessons and prevent future health crises* ( $n = 23$ ), as well as *documenting the consequences for future generations* ( $n = 11$ ). Conversely, as students' sixth rationale opposing pandemic

dialogues, some preferred to avoid them because of privacy issues. Nonetheless, only 28% of women ( $n = 24$ ), including 20% ( $n = 8$ ) of racial/ethnic minority women and the others Caucasian, and 23% of men ( $n = 21$ ) pointed to *privacy issues as a reason for not tackling pandemic subjects*. According to the coding for women, some wished to avoid communicating about the pandemic *due to a reluctance to discuss family loss* ( $n = 4$ ), in addition to their belief that *the pandemic raised too many arguments and questions to be tackled* ( $n = 18$ ). However, many women (18%,  $n = 34$ ), including racial/ethnic minorities (23%,  $n = 20$ ), as well as men (23%,  $n = 43$ ), reported no pandemic-related privacy issues and remained willing to converse about it.

## DISCUSSION

The study produced two findings concerning women enrolled in online classes during the pandemic, who experienced greater stress levels for the four factors of focus than men. As the first finding, more women than men experienced stress both in terms of *socializing* concerning their desire to be with classmates (59%,  $n = 110$  versus 33%,  $n = 62$ ) and *a community/national political issue(s)* connected to their need to tackle pandemic-affiliated matters affecting them personally and communally (54%,  $n = 102$  versus 32%,  $n = 60$ ), with these factors also influencing them negatively academically, with under half of women versus over a quarter of men experiencing resulting stress about their *grade point average*, and less than a quarter of women versus over a tenth of men being worried about *a coursework issue(s)*. As the second finding, during the pandemic, slightly fewer women than men (21%,  $n = 40$  versus 25%,  $n = 46$ ), who suffered stress regarding their need to *socialize* and navigate *community and national politics*, also wished to converse about these factors with classmates in covering controversial political topics in class in terms of their individual and communal, social-relational, health, and financial contexts, which affected them academically negatively regarding their academic progress. Largely, the study's findings also point to steps that faculty took and might attend to now in promoting greater student belonging as part of broaching classroom discussions involving students' possible stressors and the linked individual and larger political issues they might wish to investigate in navigating the pandemic and preceding post-pandemic period as a difficult time for them, with the article offering some pedagogical design models addressing this.

Before and during the pandemic, some women, as well as men, suffered stress both linked to their ability to *socialize* and form peer bonds within their classroom setting and tackle pandemic-related *political issues* as factors damaging their *grade point average* and hampering their *coursework* and subsequent academic progress, with many facing the additional stress of health and financial problems, including 53% ( $n = 99$ ) of women and 21% ( $n = 39$ ) of men facing a *psychological condition*, and 50% ( $n = 94$ ) of women and 31% ( $n = 59$ ) of men reporting a *reduced income*. As pandemic stressors, racial/ethnic minority women also suffered either somewhat more greatly than their Caucasian cohorts or similarly to them in terms of the four main factors concerning a need for *socializing* (61% versus 56%) and dealing with *a political issue(s)* (60% versus 50%), along with their subsequent need to address their resultingly impaired *grade point average* (43% versus 40%) and *coursework* status (34% versus 21%), even as all students were from the same geographically marginalized area. Alternately, during both

the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, compared to the men, women also experienced higher stress levels for the four factors of focus, as well as the health and financial stressors depicted in Table 2, except regarding stress about *a coursework issue(s)*, wherein women and men were nearly on par during the pre-pandemic time, with the men higher by 1% point. Additionally of interest, pre-pandemic to pandemic, men's greatest rate of change stress increase percentage-wise was their growth in *socializing* stress and desire to be with classmates, up 72% ( $n = 26$ ), even though the men's stress rate for this factor remained still lower than women's (33% versus 59%). Also of interest, during the pre-pandemic time, women's largest stressor had been a *psychological condition* (46%,  $n = 86$ ), as opposed to *socializing* (32%,  $n = 60$ ) as their largest pandemic stressor.

In terms of health stressors during the pandemic, 53% ( $n = 99$ ) of women versus 21% ( $n = 39$ ) of men experienced stress linked to one or more psychological conditions, including generalized stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidality, with the women also more impacted physiologically, social-rationally, financially, and academically in terms of stress and negative institutional outcomes than the men, just as the former had been during the pre-pandemic time, except concerning both populations' stress about their *coursework* wherein the difference between the women and men was negligible. In Delavin and Barazon's (2022) study of Filipina women's pandemic, stress-related conditions, 36% of women also suffered from generalized stress, with the differences between the present study and Delavin and Barazon's (2022) likely due to the fact that the current study surveyed students about their psychological conditions as a larger category instead of as separate factors and also took place over a longer period and in another country. Yet concerning the present study, the stress that the geographically disadvantaged women, and especially the racial/ethnic minority and low SES students suffered, is compatible with that of the women students in the greater pandemic literature, including the APA's (2020) U.S. study and Aristovnik and others' (2020) international study, with researchers portraying the pandemic's detrimental effects upon racial/ethnic minority and low SES students, especially women, during this crisis.

In the present study, the women suffered stress comparable to those in other studies, and as top stressors, they were concerned about *a socializing issue(s)* and *political issue(s)* as factors damaging their *grade point average* and creating *coursework* problems for them. As women's highest pandemic stress factor hampering their academic outcomes and progress, 59% ( $n = 110$ ) worried about *socializing* concerning their desire to be physically present with their classmates, a stressor that they had experienced at a higher rate than men by 26%. Likewise, in Hembrough's (2024) and Hembrough and Cavanaugh's (2022) U.S. Southwestern pandemic studies of rural students, including racial/ethnic minority and low SES students, most women also suffered from stressors linked to establishing "normal" classmate relationships, including a need for closeness and interaction along the same patterns as before. Moreover, in Delavin and Barazon's (2022) pandemic study of Filipina women's academic stressors, 44% were worried about their absence of a campus social life; 43% felt lonely; and 30% were concerned with their inability to leave the house for future classes, factors similar to the *socializing*

stress that the present study's women faced, if at a slightly higher rate and stated in different terms. Next, in the present study regarding the women's second highest stressor, 54% ( $n = 102$ ) of women were concerned about addressing a *political issue(s)*, up 29% ( $n = 23$ ) from their pre-pandemic level as a pandemic rate nearly on par with the other pandemic studies' findings, including Gallup's (2020) U.S. survey, where 59% of students were stressed about politics, and the APA's (2020) U.S. study, where 65% of students demonstrated anxiety about the nation's uncertain climate as a similarly relevant figure. Furthermore, as the present study's authors have indicated concerning the needs of the study's women, Active Mind's (2020) U.S. pandemic study reported that the number of women, including racial/ethnic and low SES minorities, desiring belonging, support, and campus forums for communicating about themselves and their needs was also brought to light. In the present study, academically, some women suffered stress related to their *grade point average* (41%,  $n = 77$ ) and a *coursework issue(s)* (23%,  $n = 43$ ), with a few also experiencing difficulty in selecting a major (15%,  $n = 29$ ) and having teacher problems (14%,  $n = 26$ ) as connected hurdles during this time. Meanwhile, in the literature, U.S. researchers point to the occurrence of similar student obstacles, with López-Castro and others (2021) reporting that a third of Northeastern students were unable to attend school for weeks, and Aucejo and others (2020) finding that 11% of Southwestern students withdrew from their classes, and 12% switched majors. In the present study, compared with Caucasian women, the racial/ethnic minority women also suffered similarly greater educational setbacks than their peers concerning their *grade point average*, with a difference of 12% points for this factor between the populations, and *coursework*, with a difference of 13% points.

Meanwhile, according to survey findings and short-answer coding, as a connected study concern, some women, if a small number, also wanted the opportunity to talk or write about their pandemic stressors and experiences in their courses for three reasons: in order to *express themselves personally and politically in practicing critical thinking and argumentation and encouraging political action; share with others and build bonds; and give or receive assistance related to their individual and community needs*. In total, over a fifth (21%,  $n = 40$ ) of women, as well as a quarter ( $n = 46$ ) of men, wished to converse or write about their pandemic stressors and contexts, even if the men demonstrated a slightly higher approval rate for this course design than the women by 4%, with the men also contrastingly having a lower pandemic stress rate involving their ability to socialize with classmates than women, perhaps because of the men's greater need to tackle controversial, political issues particularly and not simply be together with classmates in order to communicate about matters more generally. Nonetheless, of women desiring the option to talk or write about their pandemic stressors and experiences in class, their first reason for doing so was for the purpose of *personal and political expression and communication, including practicing critical thinking and argumentation and encouraging political action*. Notably, many women reported feeling validated by their teachers and classmates in conversing about the pandemic and their related circumstances, wanted to discuss their pandemic stressors and linked personal and family stories, were unhampered by privacy concerns or the possibility of others' contentious reactions, and identified the pandemic as a relevant subject for their courses' and major's curricular content and hence their current or future career and



interests. Coincidentally, the women were also unbothered by the possibility that by expressing themselves politically, they might not possess all the answers to the pandemic-related questions being raised but remained interested in tackling the pandemic's changing nature and politics. In valuing the ability to utilize critical thinking and argumentation skills in covering the pandemic, the study's women resembled Gallup's (2020) U.S. students surveyed, who wished to converse about current topics, including the pandemic, to promote critical thinking and political action more largely, as well as Carpenter and Dunn's (2022) U.S. students, who benefited from faculty promoting the former's engagement in free speech and civic participation during the pandemic as pedagogical tools. Additionally important within the present study, no women reported meeting a sense of hateful opposition from classmates due to a sharing of ideas about the pandemic but rather claimed that everyone gained a greater appreciation for one another, an outcome aligned with Gallup's (2020) judgment of this design approach as beneficial in promoting students' self-expression, community, and a knowledge of others through pandemic-oriented, national political dialogues. Significantly, in the U.S., the Learning Network (2020) found that during the pandemic, students' greatest need after addressing basic living requirements was to engage in conversations about it both within the classroom as well as elsewhere concerning how it altered their lives by creating uncertainty, a finding the present study highlights and expands. Indeed, in the present study, some students, if slightly fewer women than men, also wanted to discuss the pandemic as a current event, including hearing diverse stories and opinions in order to contextualize their own.

As the women's second and third reasons for desiring to talk or write about their pandemic stressors and experiences in their coursework, they wished to do so in order to *share with classmates and build bonds*, as well as gaining the ability to *give and receive assistance regarding classmates' individual and communal needs*. During the pandemic, as the women's second reason for wishing to speak about their pandemic stressors and circumstances, they wanted to *share with their classmates and build bonds* in forging valuable relationships with them during this time despite their being in an online class environment, including having the ability to raise meaningful conversations about their stressors and linked pandemic settings and so address or alleviate them. Comparably in the literature, Gallup (2020) found that U.S. students believed that universities should be locations where they could converse about current topics to encourage community. International researchers, Al-Rasheed (2021), Delavin and Barazon (2022), and Lee and others (2021), reported that when women's coursework moved online, they also felt isolated to a greater degree; missed in-person campus interactions; and felt unconnected to college life, with more women experiencing this status than men. Proceeding, in the present study, as the women's third reason for desiring to talk or write about their pandemic stressors and experiences with their classmates, some women yearned to *give and receive assistance concerning everyone's individual and community needs*, with many women reporting that they assisted classmates by providing pandemic-related advice and identifying scarce and difficult to find resources, including subsidized food, clothing, medical care, daycare, and job services. In Alrasheedy and others' (2021) related pandemic study of Saudia Arabian college students, including women, faculty had provided students with knowledge of

the COVID-19 virus and approaches to navigating it as part of classroom conversations similarly, so students would be armed with this information in order to lower their stress, navigate the pandemic, and improve their course outcomes, a design approach that women in the present study undertake themselves instead in seeking and providing classmates with assistance.

Largely, according to Wilkerson (2017), in generating conversations and assignments about controversial events, teachers can learn to value both students' worldviews while respecting their privacy by crafting neutrally worded assignments and supporting them in selecting interesting and relevant topics. Students who possess options in tackling assignments become active learners, work on tasks more conscientiously, and are more willing to converse with their classmates about their views. Similarly, for El Firdoussi and others (2020), conducting a pandemic-oriented study with Moroccan students, including women, teachers who gave students options in selecting class discussion and writing topics also supported them in experiencing better learning outcomes, even as the students were adapting to online course formats. In the present study, to positive effect concerning course outcomes, students who had choice in approaching their class discussions and assignment topics by exploring, sharing, and dealing with their social-relational, health, financial, and resultingly affected academic stressors were also able to communicate their personal and communal concerns regarding the pandemic period as a fraught time. As a set of four best practices for teachers of various disciplines wishing to connect their coursework with pandemic topics or other current discussions to peak students' interest and demonstrate the real-world nature of the subject matter investigated, Barbour (2021) offers the following approaches, with the present study upholding them as similarly valuable. First, teachers should consider their learning objectives and then decide how they can be attained by drawing from examples of pandemic-related materials or other current sources pertaining to the desired topic. Second, teachers covering current events should choose to focus on the pandemic or other present-day occurrences instead of relying only on historical happenings as examples of principles or phenomena. In the present study, a woman reiterated this point in her comments, stating that the pandemic "is a current issue that will be affecting society for many years ahead" and so should be covered. Third, teachers discussing controversial events, such as the pandemic, should understand that they do not have to reenvision their curriculum in order to do so, but by keeping up-to-date on the news, they can locate events of interest or let their students discover these on their own, promoting active learning. Fourth, teachers asking students to investigate controversial topics can do so in connection with the pandemic as many questions have been raised and remain unanswered, a point that women in the present study similarly concluded but did not view as a concern preventing dialogue.

Significantly, college women with greater classmate support levels usually experience less distress, higher academic engagement rates during class discussions, superior critical thinking skills, and better outcomes and persistence levels (Eddy et al., 2017). Moreover, in selecting a college, women consider factors such as the student body and learning environment and value instructors encouraging their participation (Zumbrunn et al., 2014). According to the study, as well as the literature, faculty should consider

examining their course designs in establishing a supportive learning environment, especially in terms of bolstering women more effectively, including minority and low SES students, by encouraging their greater participation in discussions of diverse topics, including personal or controversial ones, such as pandemic and post-pandemic issues. Through such conversations, students' differences can be diffused, needs can be met, and learning can be enhanced. Across universities, students' success rates vary based upon their sex, race/ethnicity, and income, disparities that are likely to worsen due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, according to Martin (2017), U.S. women students feel a stronger need for engaging with their peers of both sexes and from all racial/ethnic backgrounds than do men. Moreover, according to Lee and others (2021), many international women students place a high value on academics, class relationships, and dialogue as an encouraging sign for faculty moving forward in their approaches.

#### **STUDY LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

Within the pandemic, women students, as well as men, reported higher stress connected with their ability to socialize with classmates and navigate the pandemic's personal and communal political effects for themselves, a setting influencing their academic outcomes negatively, with some students also suffering for health and financial reasons. During the pandemic, 59% of women experienced stress concerning *socializing* with classmates and 54% for *political issues*, with women in turn experiencing negative academic outcomes for their *grade point average* (41%) and *coursework* (23%). Additionally, racial/ethnic minority women, including Native Americans, Hispanics/Latinas, African Americans, and Asians/Pacific Islanders, experienced somewhat greater stress for these four factors than Caucasians, with 55% to 61% of racial/ethnic minority women reporting concerns about their *grade point average*, *politics*, and *socializing*. Likewise, more than a fifth of women and a quarter of men also desired to discuss controversial topics, such as the pandemic and related political subject matter, within their classrooms, with the men being slightly more willing to do so. Yet of women preferring to cover the pandemic, 49% of racial/ethnic minority women and 44% of Caucasians pointed to the crisis as being a valuable current event to discuss as their top reason for doing so. As study limitations, during the pandemic, the authors did not possess the longitudinal ability to track students' stressors over an extended timeframe into the post-pandemic period to gauge their further potential changes and fluctuations in stressors and stress levels, but future studies could so. Moreover, again due to pandemic constraints, the present study was only able to focus on rural Southwestern students and not other U.S. rural regions by comparison due to the complexity of contacting these geographically minimalized student populations, but other researchers could expand these parameters similarly. Furthermore, as a future direction within the post-pandemic period, researchers could investigate women students' preferences, as well as those of men, for participating in classroom conversations about controversial topics related to their own contemporary events, such as pending wars or other pandemics, as well as communicating about their identities and the potential stressors they are facing. In conclusion, in approaching the post-pandemic period, faculty must explore additional pedagogical approaches to support students, especially women and racial/ethnic minorities and low SES populations, in addressing

the potential range of stressors they face and have suffered during the pandemic regarding their social-relational, health, and financial contexts, ones potentially also damaging their academic status. Indeed, Chu (2020) finds that U.S. students with mental health issues may experience greater roadblocks, including stress, than their peers and have lower academic attainment rates, a status hampering the former's personal lives, education, and careers. As an international crisis, the pandemic has raised many questions, some that remain unanswered. Nonetheless, as the study confirms, students' lack of greater pandemic knowledge and associated points of self-reflection are not reasons for their avoiding discussions of controversial and political issues such as regards the pandemic, especially when these dialogues are connected to students' backgrounds, locales, academic outcomes, and futures.

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