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BRIEF REPORT



Mentorship to Support Mental Health for Students in Applied Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Graduate student mental health is a known concern. The classic model of mentorship across graduate studies, and particularly in anthropology, provides little guidance on how to support students. There is little information readily available for students on fieldwork expectations, social and professional norms, and professional opportunities. These gaps do not empower mentors to successfully support their students during mental health crises related to graduate studies. Our report focuses on the challenges that faculty and leadership observed during the Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP), and provide mentorship strategies that have been tried, and observed to be successful in supporting graduate students.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Graduate students across the country often experience mental health issues during graduate school. In spite of available mentorship, these students do not always know how to navigate the unwritten rules of professional development in graduate school, which can either lead to, or increase mental health crises. In this paper, we explore strategies that mentors can use to aid their students during graduate school to prevent mental health crises, or mitigate the fallout from these crises.

KEYWORDS

graduate studies;
mentorship; mental health

Graduate student mental health is a known concern. In a 2018 survey, Evans et al. found that graduate students are “more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population.” The classic model of mentorship in anthropology provides little guidance to students on fieldwork expectations and social and professional norms, and this model does not empower mentors to support their students during mental health crises related to graduate studies. In providing mentorship and training in anthropological methods, the Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) faculty and leadership observed a number of challenges to mental health among students, including anxiety produced by dissertation and fieldwork planning. Here, we describe some of the challenges that students expressed, and provide recommendations for mentorship.

Finding the hidden curriculum

Graduate students navigate a formal, or explicit, curriculum and a “hidden,” or implicit curriculum. The hidden curriculum includes unspoken social and professional norms regarding research expectations, financial investments (e.g., self-funding research), and career pathways. Students may or may not uncover this hidden curriculum on their own and the resulting emotional labor can have negative consequences for mental health.

Clear communication

Our experiences with graduate students who participate in CAMP indicate several important interventions. First, whenever there is an occasion to do so, mentors should establish clear communication to help students understand the social and professional norms specific to careers inside and

outside academe. Mentors should also expose harmful norms, including those that are unspoken. For example, most cultural anthropology graduate students are encouraged to develop their own field site, rather than going to sites where their advisors already have access. This can be isolating and challenging for graduate students. Unpacking this often unspoken norm provides support for alternative field sites. For some nonacademic jobs, lack of fieldwork is not a liability. For students who know they would prefer a nonacademic job, dissertation research can be based on surveys or on secondary analysis of already collected data.

Explain the financial hurdles associated with fieldwork and tell students about the range of available funding sources for graduate studies and fieldwork. We suggest that mentors speak openly with students about financial realities and expectations. For students without grant funding, expecting that they take on student loan debt to fund 12–18 months of dissertation fieldwork can be distressing and financially harmful. Instead, shorter fieldwork stints, such as when collecting preliminary data, could be enough for a dissertation or rapidly advance their dissertation work. Silence around fieldwork expectations, including costs and length of time in the field, can provoke feelings of anxiety for graduate students. To deal with this, we also recommend clearly explaining how ethnography works in detail, and describing how much data is “enough” to complete a dissertation as this may impact length of time in a field site (and therefore, the financial commitment).

Teaching with grace

Our work with graduate students in CAMP also indicates that experiences with mentorship at home institutions can vary widely. While many of our students are well-advised, there are mentorship gaps that can be addressed to promote better mental health for students. Clear, concise expectations for theoretical engagement, research design, and explicit strategies for collaborating with community partners, can demystify dissertation research expectations and mitigate anxiety related to fieldwork planning. We adopt a “teaching with grace” model (Gay 2018, Su 2013) to provide students with descriptions of our own

time as graduate students, explaining where, why, and how we did our fieldwork and with whom we collaborated and why. While the expectation is not for students to adopt our exact approach, these stories may validate students’ experiences and provide opportunities for students to critically engage our own experiences and openly discuss strategies that best fit their work and positionalities.

Embracing new methods

We also recommend that mentors use non-classical mentorship styles. While many of us have been trained in the Socratic feedback style when developing dissertation proposals, our data show that approaches from the arts and natural sciences, when combined with the Socratic approach (our NSF CAMP Method, or the NQ-ABC; see Ruth et al. 2024), often produce an environment where students feel comfortable accepting feedback, rather than searching for the “right” answers, which can produce feelings of insecurity.

Finally, we advocate for mentors to embrace innovative methods and encourage collaborative work across sub-fields. While acknowledging the significance of participant observation and ethnography in our field, we propose a broader approach to research methods training by encouraging deductive research and multi-method fluency. While ethnography and participant observation are the hallmark of our field and should not be cast aside, embracing a wider methodological range not only produces more nuanced data, it prioritizes the training interests and wellbeing of our students by improving their professional scholarship.

Conclusion

The NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program is designed to train graduate students in research methods. During these training sessions, however, faculty often observe the challenges students encounter related to fieldwork, hidden curriculum, and overall mentorship. Here, we provide some suggestions to encourage graduate students and their mentors to manage and

ameliorate the mental health challenges that accompany the graduate school experience.

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Rosalyn Negrón is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she is also Research Director for the Sustainable Solutions Lab. Rosalyn's research is primarily driven by issues of health and well-being, with particular attention to the role of decision-making, social connections, social environments, and migration. A past Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, Rosalyn's research has been funded by numerous agencies including the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency. She is co-founder and director of UMass Boston's Transdisciplinary Dissertation Proposal Development Program.

Keegan C. Krause is a public health researcher and PhD candidate in human biology and medical anthropology at Northwestern University. Keegan holds an MPH in global family health and an MA in Latin American Studies, both from the University of Arizona. Previously a K-12 teacher and community health educator, Keegan has worked in community-engaged and applied research contexts in the Southwest and Midwest regions of the United States, and in several contexts in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Keegan's current research focuses on the politics of belonging, biosocial embodiment, and the effects of stress on inflammatory regulation and health among migrant tourism workers in the Dominican Republic.

Cindi SturtzSreetharan is an associate professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change. Her interests have centered on a language-in-interaction approach to the construction of masculinity. Most of her work has focused on how Japanese men use language as a resource for creating, maintaining or refuting a masculine identity. More recently, she has turned her attention to the intersection of language, the body and medicine.

Katherine Mayfour completed her M.A. from Arizona State University's Global Health program. She is the Assistant Director for the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program.

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