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Mentor and Mentee in the 'Anti-DEI' Era: Graduate Students and Wellbeing

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Over the past five years since the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students have expressed a decline in mental health. Even before this, graduate students were more likely than the general population to exhibit mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. In fact, graduate students present with post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) as well as low levels of wellbeing at significant levels. For vulnerable communities, such as students of color, women, queer, low-income, and first-generation students, the results are even more discouraging. Chirikov et al. (2020) found that 36% of Black, 48% of Latinx, 65% of queer, and 48% of low-income graduate students had anxiety and 28% of Black, 40% of Latinx, 50% of queer, and 41% of low-income graduate students showed signs of depression. Additionally, students of color and queer students have faced increasing stress from anti-DEI legislation, including passage of over 100 bills in 30 states. Anti-DEI legislation has created uncertainty that could widen inequality for marginalized communities. Thus, the need for mentors to address the wellbeing of graduate students is imperative. Seligman (2011) provides a model to examine the building blocks for wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). Utilizing Seligman (2011), this article aims to provide suggestions for mentors to help mentees navigate graduate school in the anti-DEI era. Improving graduate student wellbeing necessitates building inclusive learning environments, addressing emotional labor, creating feelings of competence, developing relationships of trust, and mentoring mentors.

Keywords: Graduate students, wellbeing, mentoring, diversity, first generation, PERMA

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, challenges to diversity initiatives in higher education, and the pressures of graduate education have all contributed to a decline in the mental health of graduate students (Chirikov et al., 2020; Gowen et al., 2023). In fact, graduate students are 6 times more likely than their peers to suffer from depression and anxiety (Evans et al., 2018) and are more likely to report symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTSS) and low levels of wellbeing (Gowen et al., 2023). Graduate students also report stress that interferes with both their wellbeing and their schoolwork, including high levels of emotional exhaustion (Hunter & Devine, 2016). Throughout their studies, many students see their mental health decline, especially those from underrepresented groups (Chirikov et al., 2020; Gowen et al., 2023). Our most vulnerable students, such as students of color, queer, first-generation, low-income, and female students, face increasing stress as legislators attack support programs aimed at helping underrepresented students and the knowledge base around issues of diversity. Over 30 states have passed over 100 anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) bills and pressure has been put on universities to end programs and services geared toward improving the educational experience for diverse students (Adams & Chiwaya, 2024), leading to "a climate of fear and uncertainty" on many campuses (Ng et al., 2025, p. 138). Mentors find themselves unsure of how to help the students, and students find themselves left without the necessary support to create a productive learning environment and mental wellbeing, widening the "existing inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups that depend on these programs for support and representation," which mentoring programs have worked to address (p. 139). Thus, in this environment, it is even more important that mentors address the wellbeing of graduate students.

Literature Review

PERMA Model

Seligman (2011) created the PERMA model to address the building blocks for wellbeing, focusing on positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. PERMA provides a framework for enhancing wellbeing and can be effectively integrated into mentoring relationships, offering a roadmap for mentors and mentees to cultivate a more fulfilling experience. Positive emotions, such as hope, compassion, pride, interest, and gratitude, promote wellbeing

and resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Engagement, which occurs when a mentee is able to use their strengths and skills to tackle a challenge, also builds wellbeing and leads to lower incidences of depression (Seligman et al., 2005). For graduate students, building trusting, positive relationships with mentors and with other students provides a sense of belonging and increases mental health and wellbeing (Charles et al., 2021). Wellbeing is also improved when students have a sense that they are valued and have a clear purpose for their work (Almasri & Kurd, 2022). Finally, graduate students increase wellbeing by creating a sense of accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Applying this PERMA model, this article will provide suggestions for mentors to help graduate students build wellbeing while navigating the anti-DEI environment by building inclusive learning environments, addressing emotional labor, creating feelings of competence, developing relationships of trust, and mentoring mentors.

Program & Model

Building Inclusive Learning Environments

Creating an inclusive learning environment is essential to the success of our increasingly diverse graduate student population. For mentors and graduate programs, this involves more than simply ensuring physical or technological accessibility; it requires cultivating spaces where all students feel a deep sense of belonging and where diverse perspectives are actively welcomed and valued. However, the rise of anti-DEI rhetoric has introduced new challenges for educators, complicating efforts to foster and sustain inclusive academic environments. In response to such pressures, some mentors and faculty may retreat into silence on equity-related issues, provide "mixed messages related to diversity" in the institution, and minimize the "experiences of people . . . outside the norm" (Linder et al., 2015, p. 180). These dynamics disproportionately affect students of color, low-income students, women, and queer students, who frequently encounter doubt about their expertise, intelligence, and scholarly worth, leading to feelings of impostor syndrome, isolation, and a decline in overall wellbeing (Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

Furthermore, many graduate students, particularly those from historically excluded backgrounds, struggle with feelings of otherness, exclusion, and hyper-invisibility as they enter programs with a significant increase of academic rigor often away from their undergraduate home school (Museus et al., 2012). Thus, providing an accessible and inclusive space is imperative. For those who mentor a wide range of students, the first steps toward all-inclusive learning spaces are willingness and accessibility. For many, stepping into the mentoring role is a show of willingness as they are put in place to share their knowledge with others with the intent of developing students into thriving academic scholars. The evolving discourse on accessibility has changed and therefore mentoring praxis must change along with it. Once primarily associated with disability, the term now encompasses a broader spectrum of barriers—linguistic, cultural, technological, and beyond (Coughlan et al., 2019).

Through this lens of expansive considerations, mentors can assess and address the deeper aspects of accessibility, which could include things like discourse barriers and technological usage. For example, diverse students may encounter barriers because they have not previously been exposed to the linguistic depth of information relayed in the forms used in higher education. In the case of graduate students, they need to be enculturated into the language and conventions of their disciplines (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Since graduate students are often inexperienced in their academic disciplines, they must be guided to gain access to academic discourse, especially since these skills can particularly and specifically determine their overall wellbeing and success. Mentors, by incorporating a multitude of learning platforms, tools, and retention models that align with mentees' learning styles, can offer mentees the opportunity to choose how they engage with material which not only empowers mentees to exhibit agency in their education but also offers the opportunity for safe and inclusive learning environments to be cultivated. This is particularly important as inclusivity seeks to "tackle the issue of supporting people that enter higher education who are traditionally excluded from it" (Coughlan et al., 2019, p. 52). Furthermore, when mentors adopt a conversational, culturally responsive communication style and elevate diverse intellectual traditions, they signal to students that their identities and ways of knowing are legitimate and valuable. In doing so, mentors help construct the foundation for equitable academic environments where all students have genuine access to thrive, contribute, and succeed.

Addressing Emotional Labor (Racism, Homophobia, Classism)

Graduate students are increasingly burdened by emotional labor, the ongoing effort to manage their internal emotional experiences while navigating the demands of academia (McLeskey & Obernesser, 2024). For many, this labor stems not only from the inherent pressures of graduate education but also from systemic forces of racism, homophobia, and classism embedded within academic institutions. Thus, as McLeskey and Obernesser (2024) point out, "LGBTQ+, people of color (POC), women, and other minority instructors engage in more unpaid emotional labor" (p. 46). These intersecting forces create hostile or isolating environments where marginalized students feel compelled to suppress parts of themselves to survive and to feel heard. Additionally, these students often

carry the unspoken expectation to educate others about their identities, represent their communities on diversity panels, and perform gratitude for merely being included in historically exclusive spaces (Dortch, et al., 2025). This unpaid and unrecognized labor frequently involves code-switching, silence in the face of microaggressions, and managing discomfort in departments that fail to meaningfully address bias (Neal & Espinoza, 2023).

The rise of anti-DEI legislation only contributes to these emotional demands. Many students now find themselves in institutions where their presence is increasingly politicized or viewed as expendable. The dismantling of DEI initiatives is not a neutral act; it signals to marginalized students that their experiences of discrimination are not worthy of institutional concern. Neal and Espinoza (2023) argue, "[R]acially minoritized students are expected to remain quiet even as other students uphold their violent positions...The emotional labor that marginalized educators and students expend in surface acting can lead to greater feelings of burnout and distress, while facilitating their disengagement from educational organizations" (p. 96). This emotional labor is rarely acknowledged in formal evaluations of student performance or success. Institutions often mistake endurance for resilience, while failing to account for the ongoing psychological costs of surviving in academic spaces built without marginalized students in mind (Dortch et al., 2025). When students must constantly navigate hostile climates, justify their belonging, and suppress emotional responses to discriminatory experiences, the toll is cumulative and profound.

Mentorship can play a transformative role in alleviating some of this burden. Using the PERMA framework, mentors can help create emotionally safe environments. Prioritizing authentic relationships and fostering meaning allows students to feel seen and valued beyond their academic output (Seligman, 2011). For students navigating oppression, a mentor who actively affirms their identity and advocates for their inclusion can significantly reduce the weight of emotional labor. Ultimately, institutions must go beyond symbolic gestures toward equity. Addressing emotional labor requires an honest reckoning with how racism, homophobia, and classism shape graduate student experiences. This means not only supporting individual students but transforming the systems that make emotional labor a condition of their academic survival.

Creating Feelings of Competence and Accomplishment

The framework of socialization has been instrumental in understanding how graduate students develop professional and academic identities as they progress through their programs (Weidman et al., 2001). Socialization "refers to the process through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge" (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 5). This process not only prepares students for success during graduate school but also equips them for the demands of their future careers. However, many graduate students experience role confusion and feelings of inadequacy as they attempt to navigate the dual expectations of being both students and emerging professionals. Svyantek et al. (2015) highlight a common misalignment between the graduate students' multiple roles, which often require them to act as both mentor and mentee. Svyantek et al. (2015) indicate that "this misalignment of role identities between perceptions of graduate school and of future careers indicates that at the very least, graduate students experience feelings of lack of preparedness, which may indicate that graduate programs are not adequately preparing students for the roles their future careers will demand of them" (2015, p. 12). This tension is especially evident in positions such as teaching or research assistantships, where graduate students are tasked with significant responsibilities: mentoring undergraduates, designing and managing coursework, grading, setting boundaries, and mastering time management, all while advancing their own academic and professional development. Without adequate institutional support and access to resources, this workload can quickly become overwhelming and detrimental to student wellbeing. First-generation graduate students are particularly disadvantaged, as they are less likely to have prior experience navigating complex institutional systems or to possess the informal knowledge often passed down through academic networks (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). These challenges are compounded when institutions fail to clearly communicate expectations or provide meaningful guidance beyond a student handbook. While such guides are helpful reference tools, they are insufficient in cultivating the confidence and institutional knowledge required to thrive in graduate education.

To address these gaps, graduate programs must prioritize the creation of intentional, ongoing spaces for dialogue between students and mentors, creating spaces where students can raise questions, voice concerns, and seek guidance on navigating their multifaceted roles. Building such mentor-mentee relationships strengthens departmental communication, fosters student engagement, and cultivates positive emotion and engagement (Seligman, 2011). Incorporating a mix of formal and informal events with flexible scheduling can further enhance these connections, while laying the groundwork for a shared repository of resources. Furthermore, mentors need to help students navigate the institutional bureaucracy and provide students with professional training along with their research and classes. Mentors must help graduate students clarify their roles and learn strategies to balance their multiple responsibilities.

In the current climate, however, the dismantling of DEI initiatives has made these efforts more difficult. Students from historically underserved backgrounds often rely more heavily on structured DEI programs for mentorship, training, and access to institutional knowledge. Mukta Kulkarni cautions that in the absence of formal DEI programs, "unofficial 'shadow' programs" may emerge as grassroots efforts to fill the void—though well-intentioned, these informal networks risk reinforcing exclusivity, mistrust, and unequal access (Ng et al., 2025, p. 141). DEI programs have historically facilitated critical networking opportunities that build community and expand access to institutional resources (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). Without them, the burden increasingly falls on individual mentors to fill these gaps. Clear communication of responsibilities, transparent expectations, and equitable access to professional development are essential for graduate student success. Departments must find a way to consolidate their resources and have effective channels of communication to help graduate students flourish.

Developing Relationships of Trust

Graduate school is a life-changing journey, often characterized by intellectual rigor, demanding hours, and various stressors, including loneliness, imposter syndrome, and low self-efficacy (Evans, et al., 2018). Amidst these challenges, the quality of relationships graduate students cultivate significantly impacts their wellbeing, mental health, and overall success in graduate school. This is particularly important for vulnerable students, such as students of color, queer, first-generation, low-income, and female students as they often face additional systemic and interpersonal challenges. Fostering meaningful relationships with mentors and other graduate students is imperative to the overall wellbeing of graduate students.

Trust is the fundamental building block for any strong relationship (Seligman, 2011). For graduate students, trust fosters open communication, vulnerability, and mutual support, which are important to navigate the complexities of graduate studies effectively. Trust is even more vital for vulnerable students as they face microaggressions and lack of visible role models, and the emotional labor of self-advocacy. These relationships provide critical emotional support, intellectual stimulation, and an important sense of community, buffering against the inherent pressures of graduate school. When trust is present, students feel secure enough to seek help, share vulnerabilities, and celebrate successes, reinforcing the relational fabric of their academic lives (Al Makhamreh & Kutsyuruba, 2021). Similarly, trusting relationships with peers create a safe space for collaboration, shared problem-solving, and emotional support, easing feelings of isolation and loneliness that often accompany graduate studies (Paolucci & Miller, 2021).

Trusting, meaningful relationships foster positive emotions, which in turn can enhance overall wellbeing. Feeling safe, understood, and supported by mentors and peers reduces stress and anxiety, fostering feelings of happiness, security, and belonging, particularly for vulnerable students who face unique challenges (Charles et al., 2021). A supportive mentor can alleviate anxieties about academic research and the rigors of graduate school overall. Graduate students who feel genuinely supported are more likely to experience positive emotions, which in turn enhances their overall wellbeing. Similarly, when graduate students trust their mentors' expertise and guidance, they are more likely to become fully engaged in their academic pursuits, experiencing greater comfort with and feeling efficacious about their research and scholarly pursuits (Seligman et al., 2005).

Additionally, strong, trusting relationships can deepen a graduate student's sense of meaning and purpose and a sense of accomplishment in graduate school. Mentors, through their guidance and shared wisdom, can help students connect their research to a broader societal impact or personal values (Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, a mentor can promote the wellbeing of a graduate student by providing consistent, constructive feedback, celebrating milestones, and offering consistent guidance through obstacles (Hoover & Lucas, 2023). This directly contributes to a student's ability to achieve academic and professional goals. The recognition and validation received within trusting relationships amplify the feeling of achievement, transforming individual successes into shared triumphs.

Mentoring Mentors (Ally vs. Advocate)

Mentor identity based in allyship is not enough to serve underrepresented students well. Action and advocacy are also important in becoming an efficient ally. Mentors must withdraw from passive support and instead engage in intervention. Allyship and empathy are the first steps to providing effective support to underrepresented students in this anti-DEI era. Although allies are defined as people who have the privilege or social power to stand against injustice targeted towards people who lack such privilege and thus create a more equitable and diverse institution, some efforts are meritless and can even backfire because the ally acts on what they think is best for the oppressed (Hanasono et al., 2022). Completing the unconscious bias training institutions have historically assigned to faculty and staff does not provide allyship or advocacy, as research continues to show these trainings do not contribute significantly to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (Noon, 2018). Advocacy and action, or chaotic mentoring relationships, are means for disrupting dominant narratives by providing alternative discourses and making them more visible (Allan, 2011). Advocacy in mentoring relationships may even include defiance against

institutional anti-DEI practices, but its primary goal is promoting opportunities for students to feel a type of belonging. Advocacy by the privileged is particularly crucial in these times as anti-DEI practices create further silencing and oppression of already marginalized communities.

Mentorship is often a two-way exchange, where mentors also learn from their mentees—an especially important dynamic when the student comes from an underserved community. An important aspect of mentor advocacy for persons of color or those who are queer, female, disabled, first-generation, or low-income, is to promote their narrative and experiences as a minority student. By providing a space for open communication, students are able to make sense of their experiences as an oppressed group, hereby increasing awareness of coping mechanisms and ways of resisting that, consequently, lead to success in academia (Kim et al., 2021). The benefit of advocacy through encouragement of narratives extends to graduate students' research. Graduate research surrounding BIPOC and other underrepresented groups is not only a form of advocacy in mentorship, but a form of resistance against anti-DEI practices (Silverstein et al., 2024). Encouraging students to include their intersectional identities into their research and even meet with faculty that also share the same identities encourages a functional mentorship relationship (Suriel et al., 2018).

Marginalized students have reported higher stress levels since anti-DEI legislation and practices have increased; thus, mentors have a duty to assist students to reclaim their stolen voices and power (Adams & Chiwaya, 2024). Advocacy is uncomfortable, but the mentor holds power and privilege the student may not hold. Therefore, it is necessary to promote student success and stand against injustice. Now more than ever, students need productive and culturally-responsive mentoring.

Conclusion

Although anti-DEI legislation and the rollback of diversity initiatives are disrupting programs across higher education, decades of research affirm that diversity is not only vital to student success but also critical to our nation's competitiveness (Milem & Hakuta, 2000). Diverse learning environments foster innovation, improve student learning, and promote civic engagement by increasing cultural awareness, acceptance of diverse people, tolerance of different beliefs, and leadership effectiveness (Hurtado, 2001). Yet, as our most vulnerable graduate students face mounting challenges to their identities, safety, and sense of belonging, their wellbeing, academic achievement, and professional success are increasingly at risk.

Recommendations

In this context, the role of mentors becomes even more urgent. Mentors are uniquely positioned to serve as advocates, guides, and allies who can create inclusive spaces that affirm students' identities and support their development. As mentors, we must address the needs of our students to help improve the wellbeing and success of all graduate students. To ensure that graduate education truly serves all students, we must be proactive in meeting the needs of those most impacted by institutional inequities. By implementing the following strategies, mentors and programs can help build environments where every student is respected, empowered, and equipped to thrive:

- Consider culturally responsive approaches to mentoring.
- Encourage students to share their experiences as marginalized students so they can make sense of their experiences.
- Urge institutions to provide support to the student populations under attack by anti-DEI legislation.
- Connect students with faculty and staff who share the same intersectional identities to promote community and understanding.
- Acknowledge emotional labor and students' multiple identities.
- Delineate clear responsibilities for graduate students and recognize the conflicting roles they play.
- Build inclusive learning environments by addressing accessibility.
- Build trusting, meaningful relationships between graduate student and mentor.

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