

Supporting Wellbeing as a Mentorship Competency in Graduate Education

Harlin, J., Patterson, C., & Sytha, S

Texas A&M University

Supporting the wellbeing of students in higher education is challenging, but particularly so for graduate and professional students. Mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety are strong negative predictors of academic outcomes like persistence/retention and grade point average (GPA). Actively supporting student wellbeing can improve trajectories. Recent studies have shown that more students are actively seeking mental health services, likely as a result of the changing stigma of seeking mental health services. Studies show that up to 50% of graduate students report depression, anxiety, or burnout, and poor mental wellbeing is a major contributor to their decision to leave academia. Additionally, the prevalence of mental health problems is increasing in college populations. The Healthy Minds study observed a rise in past-year suicidal ideation from 6-8% (2005-2013) to 11% in 2016-2017. The increased use of social media has been an important contributing factor to these changes. Expanding knowledge centered on-campus resources and supports surrounding mental health is complex due to the changing landscape and particular needs of the graduate student population. Ensuring that the entire graduate community is well-informed and equipped to support students dealing with a variety of wellbeing issues is critical to ensure the success of students in the graduate context. Providing professional development to those in the graduate community is one way to combat this issue. The Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research provides an evidence-based curriculum shown to improve mentoring outcomes for mentors and mentees. One competency offered through CIMER is "Supporting Well-Being." In fall 2024, this competency was added to the institution's offerings in the Graduate Mentoring Academy. Aside from providing space to de-stigmatize wellbeing and mental health supports, this paper identifies mental health resources that are unique to the institution and community to support students.

Keywords: Student wellbeing, higher education, Healthy Minds study, CIMER, mental health

Acknowledgements: This work was made possible through the support of the Graduate and Professional School and the Center for Teaching Excellence at Texas A&M University.

Introduction

Supporting the wellbeing of students in higher education is a complex and multifaceted challenge, and it becomes even more critical when focusing on graduate and professional students. These students often face unique stressors, including intense academic pressure, financial strain, isolation, and uncertainty about future career paths (Evans et al., 2018). Mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety are not only prevalent in this population but are also strongly linked to adverse academic outcomes, including lower grade point averages (GPA), reduced persistence, and higher dropout rates (SenthilKumar et al., 2023). These conditions can impair concentration, motivation, and the ability to manage time and responsibilities effectively (SenthilKumar et al., 2023). However, institutions that actively invest in student wellbeing can significantly alter these

trajectories. Proactive support, such as accessible mental health services, peer support networks, inclusive mentoring, and policies promoting work-life balance, can foster resilience, improve academic performance, and enhance student satisfaction (Evans et al., 2018; SenthilKumar et al., 2023). Creating a culture that prioritizes mental health benefits individual students and strengthens the educational community by promoting retention, innovation, and long-term success.

Literature Review

The article by SenthilKumar et al. (2023), "Addressing the Decline in Graduate Students' Mental Wellbeing," explores the alarming rise in mental health challenges among graduate students and calls for systemic reform in academic institutions. The authors document increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and

burnout, attributing these issues to a combination of academic pressures, financial burdens, and insufficient institutional support. They identify key contributing factors such as inadequate mentorship, long working hours, poor work-life balance, and the persistent stigma surrounding mental health in academia. These challenges impair students' academic performance and personal wellbeing and threaten the scientific workforce's sustainability and innovation. The authors advocate for comprehensive institutional changes, including better mentor training, expanded access to mental health resources, and policies that foster a more inclusive and supportive academic culture. They emphasize that faculty, university leadership, and policymakers must take collective responsibility to prioritize mental wellbeing as a core element of graduate education and academic success.

The 2018 report from the Healthy Minds Network provides a comprehensive overview of mental health trends among college and university students across the United States. Drawing from the Healthy Minds Study (2018), a large-scale, web-based survey conducted at numerous institutions, the report highlights the growing prevalence of mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among students. It reveals that while many students experience significant psychological distress, a substantial portion do not seek help, often due to stigma, lack of awareness, or limited access to services. The study (2018) also explores students' attitudes toward mental health, their use of campus resources, and the impact of mental health on academic performance and overall wellbeing. The findings underscore the importance of proactive mental health strategies on campuses, including increasing awareness, reducing stigma, and expanding access to counseling and support services. The report (2018) serves as a valuable tool for institutions aiming to assess student needs, evaluate existing programs, and advocate for improved mental health infrastructure. Findings included:

- The prevalence of depression (37%), anxiety (31%), and suicidal ideation (11%) among students.
- That 60% of students did not seek help, despite experiencing mental health challenges.
- The main barriers to seeking help: limited access (45%), stigma (30%), and lack of awareness (25%).
- The impact on academics, with 64% of students reporting an adverse effect on their performance.

The article "Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education" by Evans et al. (2018) presents compelling data highlighting the widespread mental health challenges graduate students face. Based on a global survey of 2,279 graduate students from 234 institutions across 26 countries, the study found that 41% of respondents exhibited moderate to severe anxiety, and 39% showed signs of moderate to severe depression. These rates are significantly higher than those

observed in the general population. The study also identified key factors contributing to this crisis, including poor work-life balance, inadequate mentorship, and gender disparities, with women and gender-nonconforming individuals reporting higher levels of distress. The authors emphasize that these findings are not isolated but reflect a broader, systemic issue within graduate education. They call for urgent institutional reforms, including better mental health support, improved mentoring practices, and policies that promote wellbeing and inclusiveness in academic environments.

In *Entering Mentoring* (Pfund et al., 2015), the authors emphasize that effective mentoring is crucial for supporting mentee's mental health and overall wellbeing, particularly in research and academic settings. The book outlines how strong mentoring relationships can help mentees navigate the emotional and intellectual challenges of their training by fostering a sense of belonging, building confidence, and promoting resilience. Key mentoring practices—such as maintaining open communication, aligning expectations, and providing constructive feedback—are shown to reduce stress and uncertainty, which are common contributors to mental health struggles. Additionally, culturally aware and responsive mentors can create inclusive environments that validate the diverse experiences of mentees, further enhancing their psychological safety and motivation. By promoting independence while offering consistent support, mentors play a vital role in helping mentees manage the pressures of academic life and develop healthy coping strategies.

Patterson et al. (2023) highlight the implementation of the CIMER's evidence-based competencies within the university's Faculty Mentoring Academy. The authors describe how the academy integrated evidence-based mentoring and coaching practices to support faculty development, particularly focusing on new competencies such as Supporting Well-Being, Enhancing Work-Life Integration, and Cultivating Ethical Behavior. The authors emphasize the importance of structured mentor training and reflective practice, noting that the CIMER framework provided a shared language and actionable strategies for mentors across disciplines. Through workshops, guided discussions, and feedback loops, the academy cultivated a culture of intentional mentorship to enhance both mentor effectiveness and mentee outcomes. The article concludes by advocating for institutional investment in mentoring infrastructure to sustain and scale these efforts. This work was the springboard for the implementation of Supporting Well-Being across all of the Mentoring Academies at the institution.

Program

At a large R1 institution in the southwestern United States, parallel programs seek to support mentorship relationships of those in the graduate education community. The Graduate Mentoring

Academy and the Faculty Mentoring Academy are parallel programs with seven shared competencies from the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) (Pfund et al., 2015). The Faculty Mentoring Academy supports faculty at the institution, while the Graduate Mentoring Academy has a broader audience that includes faculty, staff, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate and professional students. After discovering CIMER had recently added Support Well-being as an evidence-based mentorship competency, the Faculty Mentoring Academy piloted this session in 2023 (Patterson et al., 2023).

Competencies

The competency was added to the Graduate Mentoring Academy in 2024. The Supporting Well-being learning outcomes include:

Mentors will have the knowledge and skills to:

1. Learn existing definitions of mental health and reflect on signs of wellbeing.
2. Develop awareness about how mentoring behaviors impact mentee wellbeing.
3. Identify steps to creating an environment that fosters wellbeing in a diverse group of mentees.
4. Learn to have conversations with mentees about their wellbeing and mental health.

Activities

Three activities are customized and facilitated in the Supporting Well-Being session for GMA and FMA programs using breakout groups with discussion questions. Each activity is described next.

Activity 1 - Conceptualizing Mental Health and Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), wellbeing is defined as a “state in which individuals realize their own potential, can manage the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute meaningfully to their communities”. This definition emphasizes functionality, resilience, and purpose. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers a broader perspective, noting that while there is: No single agreed-upon definition, wellbeing generally includes the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions like depression and anxiety, and a sense of life satisfaction and fulfillment. It is essentially about feeling good and judging life positively.

Complementing these views, the “Living Well” employee wellness initiative at the case study university frames wellbeing within a community context: “aims to create an environment where faculty and staff can thrive holistically—personally and professionally—within a supportive and

connected university community”. Participants are asked to consider these definitions and identify their top “Facets of Well-Being,” or those perceived to be most significant to mentors and mentees:

Facets of Well-being (10):1. Sense of control or autonomy; 2. Feelings of meaning and purpose; 3. Personal expression; 4. Feelings of belonging; 5. Personal Growth; 6. Self-Acceptance; 7. Knowing and articulating your limits (e.g., prioritizing regular sleep and social rhythms to avoid triggers for psychiatric episodes); 8. Identifying one’s vulnerabilities, stressors, and triggers; 9. Sense of Physical Safety; 10. Sense of Professional Acceptance/Confidence in Abilities

Activity 2 - Case Study: I Don’t Know if I Can Go Any Further

For the case study, participants are confronted with the following situation: Ana, a graduate student, is facing academic difficulties after performing poorly in two of her classes, which has left her worried about the potential loss of her fellowship. These setbacks lead her to question her sense of belonging in her academic program, a common emotional response among students under pressure. Recognizing the weight of her concerns, Ana decides to reach out to two of her mentors for guidance and support, taking an important step toward addressing her challenges and seeking reassurance in her academic journey.

Mentor #1. Mentor #1 responds to Ana’s concerns with a focus on practical solutions but lacks empathy and encouragement. They suggest Ana’s struggles may stem from poor time management and insufficient effort, recommending she study more or seek tutoring. While acknowledging that graduate school is inherently difficult, the mentor implies that not everyone is suited for it, subtly questioning Ana’s fit in the program. Rather than offering reassurance or exploring the emotional impact of Ana’s experience, the mentor frames the situation as a test of suitability, which may unintentionally reinforce Ana’s self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy.

Mentor #2. Mentor #2 responds to Ana with empathy, reassurance, and a collaborative mindset. They acknowledge the difficulty of her situation without minimizing her feelings and immediately work to counter her fear of being dismissed from the program. Instead of questioning her capabilities, the mentor affirms Ana’s value by highlighting her intellectual contributions and the strength of her research. They express a clear commitment to supporting her and shift the conversation toward constructive problem-solving, suggesting they explore available resources together to help her succeed academically. This response fosters a sense of belonging and support, reinforcing Ana’s confidence and resilience. Participants are asked to first consider the following questions:

1. What are your first reactions to the scenario? Write down some of the emotions and/or

physical responses you are feeling. Share with team members.

2. What are the assumptions that you find yourself making about the mentor providing Ana with feedback?

Participants are then asked to consider the following discussion questions:

1. How do you think these two different forms of feedback influence Ana's views about her ability to succeed in the program and her belonging at the institution? Is one form of feedback more "realistic"?
2. How do you think these different forms of feedback influence Ana's overall well-being?
3. What is the role of a faculty mentor in providing wellbeing support for their mentee?

After considering these questions in breakout groups, participants report on their small group discussion within the whole group. Facilitators emphasize the importance of supporting wellbeing and the diverse needs of mentees. Links to local mental health resources are also shared after this activity.

Activity 3 - Strategy for "facets of well-being"

To conclude the session, participants are invited to return to the mentor and mentee facets they previously identified. As a reflective "exit ticket," they are asked to choose one specific strategy that supports or enhances one of those facets. This strategy should be something they can

realistically apply in their mentoring relationships. To guide this reflection and encourage meaningful discussion, consider posing three questions:

1. What similarities or differences in the strategies mentioned did you notice?
2. When considering strategies to support, does academic discipline matter? Personal characteristics of the mentor?
3. Are there moments in the mentoring relationship when supporting wellbeing is easier or more difficult? Why?

Lastly, facilitators share links to career development plans, individual development plans, and My Grad Journey (an institutional resource to support feedback from the graduate committee to students). Participants are also asked to complete a post-test of their confidence in supporting wellbeing and an overall session evaluation.

Findings & Discussions

The Supporting Well-Being competency has been offered to 160 participants through the Graduate Mentoring Academy (130 participants since fall 2024) and the Faculty Mentoring Academy (30 participants since spring 2023) (Table 1). There are slight GMA and FMA differences in pre- and post-test scores of participants' self-perception of their ability to support wellbeing within their mentoring relationships. This research extends on the previous study (Patterson et al., 2023).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores (N = 160)

4. Measure	5. GMA Mean (130)	6. FMA Mean (30)	7. GMA Standard Deviation	8. FMA Standard Deviation
Pre-Test Score	3.15	3.50	.88	.78
Post-Test Score	4.36	4.23	.64	.77

Across all seven competencies, 94.1% of participants reported that the sessions were worthwhile use of their time. More than 96% of participants shared this positive assessment of the Supporting Well-Being competency, indicating a strong overall endorsement of the session's value. Supporting wellbeing in mentoring relationships is essential because it fosters a foundation of trust, empathy, and psychological safety, which are critical for meaningful personal and professional growth. When mentors actively attend to their mentee's emotional and mental health needs, they create an environment where individuals feel valued, heard, and empowered to navigate challenges. This holistic approach not only enhances the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship but also contributes to greater retention, satisfaction, and success for both mentors and mentees. Literature continues to emphasize the importance of supporting wellbeing as a crucial component of the mentoring relationship (SenthilKumar et al., 2023; Harlin, 2024; and Patterson et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Although there is no universally accepted definition of wellbeing, its importance within academic and professional communities is undeniable, and its support must be a shared responsibility. Wellbeing encompasses emotional, psychological, and social dimensions, and fostering it requires a collective, intentional effort. Institutions can implement various initiatives to promote a culture of wellness, such as mentorship development programs, accessible mental health services like Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) tailored for graduate students, and evidence-based programming that addresses the unique stressors of academic life. These systems provide essential infrastructure, but they are only as effective as the people who bring them to life.

Ultimately, the individuals within the organization are the most powerful drivers of a wellbeing-positive culture. Faculty, staff, mentors, peers, and administrators all play a critical role in shaping an

environment where people feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Everyday actions—like checking in on a colleague, creating inclusive spaces, modeling healthy boundaries, and responding with empathy—can have a profound impact. When people are committed to fostering connection, compassion, and psychological safety, they transform policies and programs into a living culture of care. In this way, wellbeing becomes not just an initiative, but a shared ethos embedded in the fabric of the community.

References

- Center for Disease Control (CDC); <https://www.cdc.gov/> Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CI-MER); <https://cimerproject.org/>
- Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, *36*(3), 282–284. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089>
- Harlin, J. (2024). Addressing equity and inclusion in mentoring relationships: Challenges and perspectives. *The Chronicle of Mentoring and Coaching*. <https://www.mentor-cmc.com/cmc/vol8no3/MobilePagedReplica.action?pm=2&pg=20>
- Healthy Minds Network. (2018). Healthy Minds Study among colleges and universities: FAQs about student mental health data and statistics. https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FAQs-about-Student-Mental-Health-Data-and-Statistics_FINAL.pdf
- Patterson, C. A., Ajayi-Abitogun, B., Dunn, A.L., Galloway-Pena, J. & Couri, D. (2023). Faculty Mentoring Academy insights: Implementing emergent CIMER competencies in mentoring and coaching. *The Chronicle of Mentoring and Coaching*, *8*(3), 178–183. <https://www.mentor-cmc.com/cmc/cmc2023/MobilePagedReplica.action?pm=2&folio=178#pg178>
- Pfund, C., Branchaw, J. L., & Handelsman, J. (2015). Entering mentoring. W.H. Freeman.
- SenthilKumar, G., Mathieu, N. M., Freed, J. K., Sigmund, C. D., & Gutterman, D. D. (2023). Addressing the decline in graduate students' mental well-being. *American Journal of Physiology-Heart and Circulatory Physiology*, *325*(4), H882–H887. <https://doi.org/10.1152/ajpheart.00466.2023> Texas A&M University's Living Well; <https://livingwell.tamu.edu/>
- World Health Organization (WHO); <https://www.who.int/>