

Supporting our graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background to our work & outline

NSF RAPID grant: national survey in June +July and focus groups in August

Four areas of information today

1. How are graduate students doing?
2. Their experiences with their university and with advisors.
3. Their education and career plans
4. Pandemic & Black Lives Matter

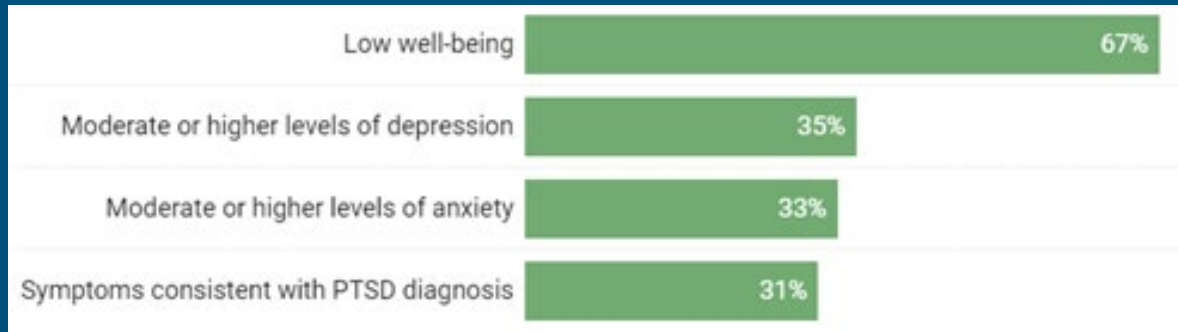
Close with a possible trauma-informed framework for graduate schools

Mixed methods study

- Overall:
 - 12 institutions; Varied by:
 - Research activity
 - Geographic location
 - Student populations
 - Students from all fields
 - Masters, Doctoral, Professional School
- Quantitative Methods
 - National survey
 - 4000+ responses
- Qualitative Methods
 - Focus groups
 - 56 participants

Results I: How are graduate students doing? Survey

- Financial stress
 - About 25% had at least some food/housing insecurity
 - 18% had parenting/caregiving responsibility, and half of those parenting were providing care mostly by themselves (8% of all grad students)
- Mental health at risk



- ~30% in a COVID-19 risk group or lived with or interact with someone who was

Results I: How are graduate students doing?

Focus groups

“I was in a **really bad place**, and I'm worried that I'm going to go back to that place in some way.

It's not necessarily a COVID thing, but COVID just **amplifies** everything...

I struggled with **mental health and anxiety** all the time, but I can manage that during normal circumstances.”

- PhD student

Results II: Experiences with the university and advisors, survey

- 2-to-1 students experienced more support from faculty than upper-level administrators
- Only 33% thought institutional policy changes supported their well-being
 - Graduate students who did not feel supported by their universities reported higher average symptoms of anxiety

Open response text:

*“This experience really highlights how **precarious being a graduate** is. You get the worst case option in the question of ‘is this person a student or an employee’. [snip]
Short-shrift on both ends, as usual, but exacerbated”*

Results II: Experience with the university and faculty Focus groups

“I have amazing **faculty** that I feel like so fortunate. All of my **professors** in the spring were just really **compassionate** about the situation...the **university** hasn't done much.” - PhD student

“...it's always unclear based on **announcements** from the university as a whole if we are the students in the situation or for the employees in the situation and it always changes.” - PhD student

Results III : Education and career plans, survey

Educational Plans

- 25% expect a delay of 6 months or longer in degree completion,

Career Plans

- 25% in STEM fields were pessimistic about conditions for pursuing their current career goals,
- More than 50% in the humanities were pessimistic;
- Well-being and career optimism were correlated

Results III : Education and career plans, focus groups

“I can't help but think that for the next, I don't know, how long this pandemic is going to be, that **my career just isn't a possibility right now.**

So that's gotten me thinking about a lot of stuff because I have to **pay the bills.** This program secures my living for **a little while,** but after this program ends, if COVID is still around,

I don't think that that career will be a possibility.”

- Masters student

Results IV : Pandemic & Black Lives Matter, survey

Students who have lost someone close to them due to COVID-19:

9% of Black student respondents, 9% of American Indian; Others ~ 3%

Open response text:

“The **Black Lives Matter movement** also was very impactful and emotionally intense - it was complicated to consider COVID and attending protests for black lives at the same time, and also **upsetting** to see protests about wearing masks. However, it has also been very good to get away from the department - less microaggressions experienced on a daily basis, but it's been **difficult to be productive**, and I am often **considering leaving the program.**”

Results IV : Pandemic & Black Lives Matter, focus groups

“I've faced some pretty **intense racism**..I'm feeling like a great deal of support to do a lot of **COVID-related research**, and look at that, then an entirely different perspective with regards to **diversity and equity in the program**...it's been difficult to me **dealing with both**. I felt like I've been supported in some [ways] but not others.” – PhD Student

“...**Black Lives Matter movement**..it was a very stressful time, just having to deal with riots and everything and worrying..then **also the pandemic**, and also school on top of all of it.” – PhD Student

Results V: International Students, survey

Compared international student responses before the July 6 ICE rule announcement, after the announcement, and after it was rescinded:

- 30% increase in average anxiety reported after rule announcement
- 28% lower average well-being reported after rule announcement

Respondent means did not return to pre-announcement levels after the rule was rescinded

Results V: International Students, focus groups

I faced a lot of **challenges**. I think mostly because I'm an **international student**...

I had to teach, and I had to take grad seminars ..on top of it, I was n't able to go back to my home country because there was a **flight ban** instituted.

I had to actually stay longer than usual that incurred some economic bind.
Unforeseen expenses, which I hadn't calculated...

challenging would be a euphemism and an understatement.

– PhD Student

Trauma informed practices: possible use?

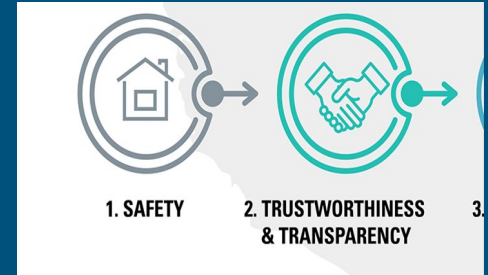
CDC https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm



Map this onto graduate support

Trauma-informed practices to consider: Safety, Trustworthiness, & Transparency

- Targeted, accessible economic support
 - Food and housing
 - Childcare funds
 - Finances for degree extensions
- Communication
 - All messages convey that you have student's interest at heart
 - Encourage and amplify exemplars of local support, departments and advisors



Trauma-informed practices to consider:

Peer support

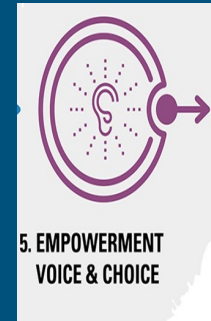
- Sustaining community
 - Regular contact w/ advisors,
 - Zoom community meetings, online socials
- Group sessions hosted by counseling services
- TA/RA discussion groups
 - TA to TA; RA to RA



Trauma-informed practices to consider:

Empowerment

- Reminders on the purpose of graduate education
 - Develop expertise, skills and knowledge
 - Making a difference
- Career works hops
 - Alumni panels
 - Networking and informational interviews
- Support of graduate student voice & activism
 - Joint projects with students on food, housing, racism,...
 - Encourage change agents



Trauma-informed practices to consider: Ongoing and retriggering

- Multiple crises going on at the same time
 - Pandemic
 - Racial injustices
 - International student status
- The ongoing nature of the pandemic
- Retriggering
 - Safety, connection, agency

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