

FASEB Webinar – Mental Health Matters: Finding Space in a University Setting Questions & Answers

We did not have time to address the following questions and answers during the live webinar. Please see the information below:

Question 1:

How much of the conversation was around financial support? My university has no financial help for mental health support (except discounted rates for months out appointments), and our stipends are abysmal like many. Was there a conversation around having this included in medical insurance, or how did the university understand that lack of access can be due to financial causes?

Answers to Question 1:

Kelsea: Affordability of resources is so important for access! At Vanderbilt, counseling sessions are free at the University Counseling Center (UCC) and I believe that our student health insurance covers some of the cost of outside mental health providers, but I unfortunately don't know the details. If a student does need off-campus mental health support, then the Student Care Network will help them find an affordable option. Another program that exists through our Student Care Network is free / subsidized ride-share that students can access to get to and from off-campus mental health appointments. All Vanderbilt students also recently received free access to BetterHelp, an online counseling platform. If your University does not have any free counseling available to graduate students or any financial support for mental health resources, then this would be an important place to work with your Student Government to focus advocacy efforts. The Vanderbilt GSC recently advocated for a University Hardship Fund for graduate students who might experience a crisis and need additional financial resources, which will go live next year. We started gathering support by asking graduate students to sign a letter of support, which we then brought to conversations with the administration.

Wendy: Agreed completely. The financial issues are frequently and consistently brought up in every survey we conduct in every grad program we've worked with. At Hopkins SPH, we specifically advocate for additional and more diverse and competent psychological and psychiatric care. We've also requested that the Dean and the Provosts office hire individuals dedicated to assisting students with navigating getting mental health services, including finding people who are currently taking clients and will do so on a sliding scale. We plan to advocate also for continuing to offer the pandemic-time tele-health services at low or no cost perpetually. Unfortunately this doesn't help you right now, but our nonprofit is planning to conduct healthcare economics research to assess the financial cost/benefits of providing massively improved and accessible mental health care to students, faculty and staff in order to argue for ubiquitous adoption of these much needed policies.

Question 2:

You spoke about workplace bullying. What would you recommend to those PhD students or postdocs who had to quit or change their labs? How can we approach other labs without a recommendation letter?

Answer to Question 2:

Wendy: Workplace bullying is a major problem in academia as indicated by the Nature Biennial Survey released last year where 1/5th of graduate students reported being bullied. Technically, you should have an institutional policy in place that protects people from harassment, intimidation and bullying. We did at Berkeley but it was very poorly advertised or enforced. If workplace bullying has forced a trainee to quit or change labs, the best way that I've heard to account for the lack of a professional letter of support from a supervisor is to solicit another letter from someone else who worked with you or an earlier advisor to speak to your skills. As Kelsea mentioned, it's always great practice to cultivate mentorship relationships with those other than your PI. These could be people on your thesis committee or in an adjacent field. Joining a scientific interest group (we had Yeast "Super Group" meetings at Berkeley for example) will allow for other professors in your field to see your work and become familiar with you. If you have to switch labs as a PhD or postdoc and can't get a typical letter from your PI to accurately reflect your accomplishments, then you could reasonably ask another informal mentor to do so. Also, due to how common it is that bullying happens, there are actually a LOT of really understanding PIs out there that will not judge you for ending up in this situation. One of our most amazing postdocs in one of my labs came from an aborted Harvard postdoc for just that reason and there was no judgement at all!

Question 3:

In my former university, there have been past efforts to bring attention to the mental health of students including organized initiatives. These were dismissed with the excuse of lack of funding (although I think there's also a lack of interest and stigma). Was funding ever an issue for organization of events/counseling etc.?

Answers to Question 3:

Kelsea: Funding can definitely be an issue that you might hear as an excuse, but I think that reinforcing the importance of mental health for all aspects of graduate education can help get around this. And there are ways that any University can make improvements without spending huge amounts of resources. For example, the Vanderbilt Graduate Life Coach that I mentioned was something that the GSC really advocated for. As a response, the University hired one person to demonstrate the need/ try it out in a way. Now, we are hoping to expand that office to several people, but the University didn't have to put too many resources into hiring a single person to demonstrate the benefit of such an office at the beginning. In general, I would say that it can help to identify areas of improvement that might be "low hanging fruit" meaning that they are relatively low effort, not too resource intensive, but very impactful for students. You may need to start small and get little wins to build up the relationship with administration, demonstrate the need and benefit, and turn that into slow and steady progress. And

definitely celebrate these small wins as they come! Culture change is slow but can be so impactful!

Wendy: Funding is an issue and can take time to get those with the purse strings to see the value of putting them towards mental health. Dragonfly Mental Health is prepared to work with interested parties, whether students, faculty or administrators that are wanting to start the conversation. As a nonprofit, we can provide these services on a sliding scale, meaning that if there are no funds internally to bring in speakers or consultants, that's not a reason to say no. Once the conversation starts, it usually opens a floodgate of understanding the incredible value or focusing on the mental health within the community.