



ASPIRE

THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
INCLUSIVE & DIVERSE STEM FACULTY

**MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT:
HOW TO SUPPORT BIPOC GRADUATE
STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH**

Written by NSF INCLUDES

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Introduction

This brief is the first in a two-part series in which the NSF INCLUDES Aspire Alliance Research Team draws on recent research studies and various news sources to explore the ongoing toll and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. college and university campuses.

In this brief, Stephanie M. Breen and Leslie D. Gonzales describe the impact of COVID-19 on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) graduate students and present a consolidated set of resources that faculty, advisors, and institutions may find helpful as they continue to work with and support BIPOC graduate students during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The next brief will discuss how colleges and universities managed DEI commitments in the context of COVID-19.

About Graduate Student

Mental Health

Even before COVID-19, researchers raised concerns about the [mental health of graduate students](#) with distinct concerns about the well-being of BIPOC graduate students. Across various disciplines, graduate students commonly [reported](#) high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to hypercompetitive environments, unhealthy work-life boundaries and balance, and/or lack of secure program funding. Particularly for those in STEM, graduate students of color [reported](#) isolation and dysfunction in ways that impacted their retention, mental health, and overall relationships with advisors and peers.

Like many inequities and challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health issues among this student population. The heightened violence against communities of color throughout the pandemic only added to BIPOC students' mental and emotional loads.

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Layered Traumas: Living in a Pandemic World with Heightened Racial Tensions

[Studies](#) conducted throughout the pandemic reveal that all college students have experienced an uptick in mental health issues. Only six months into the pandemic, [researchers found](#) that graduate students had experienced family loss, disrupted social connection and communication, unemployment, disparities in healthcare assistance, and were struggling to adjust to online learning. Many were worried about the inevitable need to extend the completion of their degree programs. And because [communities of color](#) have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, especially in the pandemic's early days, BIPOC graduate students are likely to have experienced [heightened stress](#) and [losses](#). In short, [research suggests](#) that BIPOC graduate students are more likely to experience anxiety and depression related to food and housing insecurities, loss of wages and employment, and unexpected living costs associated with technology and living expenses than their white counterparts.

As Covid-19 surged, racism raged in familiar and new ways. Anti-Asian harassment, discrimination, and racism [erupted across the country](#) amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders nationwide were victims of [violent attacks](#) in schools, businesses, and other public spaces. Among other [graduate students of color](#), AAPI students experienced heightened feelings of anxiety, depression, invisibility, and exclusion. Moreover, anti-Black violence and police brutality were broadcast across news outlets and social media platforms during the summer and fall of 2020, so that Black students may associate the combination of the pandemic, ongoing anti-Black violence, and racist rhetoric in their day-to-day lives with declines in their mental health. [Amid exhaustion](#), Black graduate students are [expected](#) to participate and engage in coursework, and along with allies, they are often tasked with the (re)education of other students, faculty, and staff about issues of racism, discrimination, and anti-Blackness in and out of classroom spaces.

With so many layered and prolonged crises, BIPOC graduate students need targeted support and



Image Courtesy of the University of South Florida

resources, but it can be difficult to know how to act. Below are a consolidated set of research-informed resources for supporting graduate student success.

Resources for Faculty and Advisors— Supporting the Wellness of BIPOC Graduate Students

Faculty and advisors play a key role in shaping student experiences and outcomes. Although campuses may be returning to normal, it is important to recognize that the pandemic is not over. Students who have experienced illness, deaths, or related stressors may express dissonance and mental and emotional distress related to the pandemic.

- Faculty and advisors should feel comfortable raising these conversations in their interactions. For example, at the beginning of class, professors can use a simple two-word check-in, as described by Dr. Brené Brown. Brown explained that a [two-word check-in](#) allows instructors to develop a sense of students' well-being and the groups' overall disposition, while also creating a quick

but meaningful opportunity for students to acknowledge and find solidarity in their feelings. Professors can use the chat function if the class is held on an online platform. If situated in an in-person setting, faculty may want to use a google jam board or word cloud options in Kahoot.

- Be prepared with [resources](#) when students do raise concerns that impact their wellness and health (e.g., counseling centers, podcasts, websites).
- Early on in the pandemic, many professors revised course policies and syllabi in recognition of the radical uncertainty with which we were living. Consider retaining some of those flexible adjustments. [Retain course policies and procedures](#) to accommodate students experiencing mental health crises as well as exposures to positive COVID-19 results.
- Faculty can and should be knowledgeable about what [campus resources](#) are available to students who are [experiencing homelessness, managing crises, in need of emergency funds, and/or need access to food pantries](#).
- Connect students to [affinity groups and identity-](#)

[based spaces](#) on campus that can provide guidance and support for BIPOC graduate students.

- Participate in comprehensive education concerning [inclusive mentorship](#) and [culturally relevant pedagogies](#). For example:
 - » The Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences (CIMER) has comprehensive resources on [Culturally Aware Mentoring \(CAM\)](#). CAM is an innovative and evidence-based initiative to improve mentors' ability to address and embrace cultural diversity in their research mentoring relationships. Cam consists of a 1-hour foundational self-paced online module and a full day of intensive workshop for small groups.
 - » In addition to the CAM resource, professors in STEM can take advantage of [The Science of Effective Mentoring in STEMM](#) guide. This website includes comprehensive descriptions and definitions of inclusive mentoring as well as resources and tools on how to improve mentoring relationships between faculty and students from underrepresented backgrounds.
 - » Professors can also visit [UCSC Silicon Valley's Tools for Impact Curriculum](#). The curriculum has DEI courses designed for educators seeking for research-informed to inclusive teaching and learning. The courses feature information regarding different learning styles, trauma-informed practices, and celebrating cultural diversity in teaching.
- Faculty should also be equipped with skills on how to [facilitate difficult dialogue](#) around racism, injustices, and issues of equity that students will raise inside and outside of classroom spaces.
 - » Professors may want to check in with their campus's teaching and learning center for such training or consider these resources: [Managing Difficult Dialogue Classroom Discussion Guide](#) by the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning at Indiana University, [Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics](#) by the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan, and [Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom Special Report](#) from Faculty Focus, Dr. Derald Wing Sue's Guide on [Facilitating Difficult Race Discussions: Five Ineffective and Five Successful Strategies](#). These tools provide guided language and concrete steps for facilitating dialogue

about race and identity in the classroom spaces. Investing in these skills and tools will help faculty and advisors create meaningful connections with all, especially, BIPOC graduate students.



Image Courtesy of the University of Arkansas

How Institutions Can Support BIPOC Students and the Faculty and Advisors that support BIPOC Students

- Provide free and accessible [telehealth services](#) for students and their families in addition to free, affordable, and low-cost [mental health counseling services](#) on campus for students.
- Continue [expanded access to food pantries](#) for students experiencing food insecurity.
- [Revisit](#) leave of absence and (re)enrollment policies to allow students enough time to recover and receive effective treatment during ongoing mental health challenges or those experiencing indirect/direct implications of the pandemic.
 - » Ensure that faculty are aware of these policies so that they can adopt them and implement them with confidence.
- [Stand in solidarity](#) with BIPOC communities on your campus. Statements of solidarity should include information regarding campus mental health resources, updates regarding the spread of COVID-19, and a zero-tolerance stance for racism or xenophobia in all campus spaces.
- [Actions to dismantle](#) white supremacy and anti-Black sentiments must follow these statements. [Invite a diverse group of students](#) to share their perspectives on the statements and actions being taken by leadership. By inviting students into these leadership spaces, administrators can learn more about how their efforts are being perceived by the

students they are serving and how to alter their approaches to change.

- Distribute campus climate surveys and questionnaires geared toward graduate students of color to better understand the impact of the landscape of racial interactions on campus and mental health and wellness needs.
 - » [Utilize this opportunity](#) to measure the impact of institutional changes and efforts to support racially marginalized student groups beyond their mental health and look towards their inclusion and sense of belonging on campus.

Unfortunately, the pandemic continues on, and while there are glimmers of hope, many vulnerable communities continue to wrestle with the worst of this pandemic's effects. There is always time to reflect and revisit — as faculty, as advisors, as leaders, and as allies — what have we done to support our students, especially students of color who may be carrying a particularly heavy load? Have we followed through? Have we remained staunch supporters?

In the next brief, NSF INCLUDES Aspire Alliance Research Team Members, Travis Olson and Leslie D. Gonzales will discuss how campuses are managing DEI commitments in the context of COVID-19. The resource will be of interest to those interested in the practice and development of higher education leadership.

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