

# Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health & Wellbeing

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*21 September 2022*

MUS Summit @ MSUB  
*Enhancing Community Mental Health & Wellbeing*



# Overview





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- **Meet a grad student—Natasha Chadwell**
- **HOPES overview, motivation & goals—Bev Hartline**
- **Student activities—Sarah Keller**
- **Grad student experience with HOPES pilot—Natasha Chadwell**
- **Faculty activities—Ashby Kinch**
- **Q&A and Discussion**



# Grad Student Mental Health: A National & International Problem

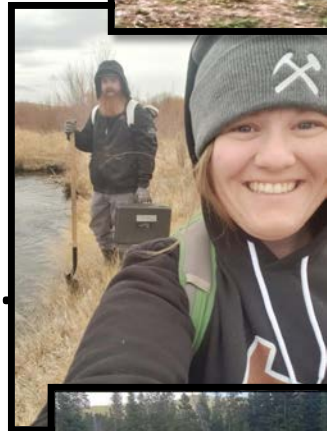
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- **High stress; impostor syndrome; money; school-work-family conflicts**
- **Mental health struggles of grad students are growing** (Okahana 2018)
  - Amplified by COVID-19, sociopolitical turmoil, & career uncertainty
- **Over 1/3 seek help for depression; ~1/5 harassed** (Global survey by *Nature* 2019)
  - Some needing help don't seek it  stigma, cost
- **Advisor relationship & power differential**  **success or derailment**
- **Broadening diversity of grad students**  **varied mentoring needs**
  - Students from different cultures & demographics need different mentoring
  - Disconnect is much worse for women, diverse gender identities, racial/ethnic minorities, veterans, students with disabilities, and international students
- **Campus services mostly designed for undergrads**  **very different needs**



# A little about me...

- **1992:** Born in Boise, ID to a blue-collar, non-academic family
- **2010:** Graduated HS and said, "I think I'll take a year off..."
- **2016:** Daughter was born. Enrolled in an undergraduate program
- **2018:** Internship then later hire at NCAT
- **2020:** New job at Tech and graduation! Oh, and COVID...
- **2021:** Accepted to MS Ecological Restoration Program
- **Dec. 2022:** Graduation!



- *Butte Science Mine, Board Member*
- *Montana Native Plant Society*
- *Society of Ecological Restoration*
- *Tech Grad Student Advisory Board, co-chair*
- *Vice President of MFPE Local 8521*

## What lies ahead?



# HOPES Project Goal & Objectives

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- **Mental H Health Opportunities for Professional Empowerment in STEM**
- **Goal: *design, pilot, assess, and implement evidence-based, sustainable, and replicable strategies to facilitate and enhance graduate-student mental health.***
- **Objectives**
  - Build and test activities that enable diverse STEM graduate students to acquire skills for positive mental health and resilience
  - Provide professional development for STEM faculty advisors to support graduate-student mental health and transform the department's culture
  - Pilot scale-up and expansion to other campuses
  - Assess to guide the project and determine its impacts
- **National Science Foundation funding: \$500 K, 15 August 2021 to 31 July 2024**
  - Collaboration among Montana Tech, MSU-Billings, and UM
  - Just finished “pilot” year



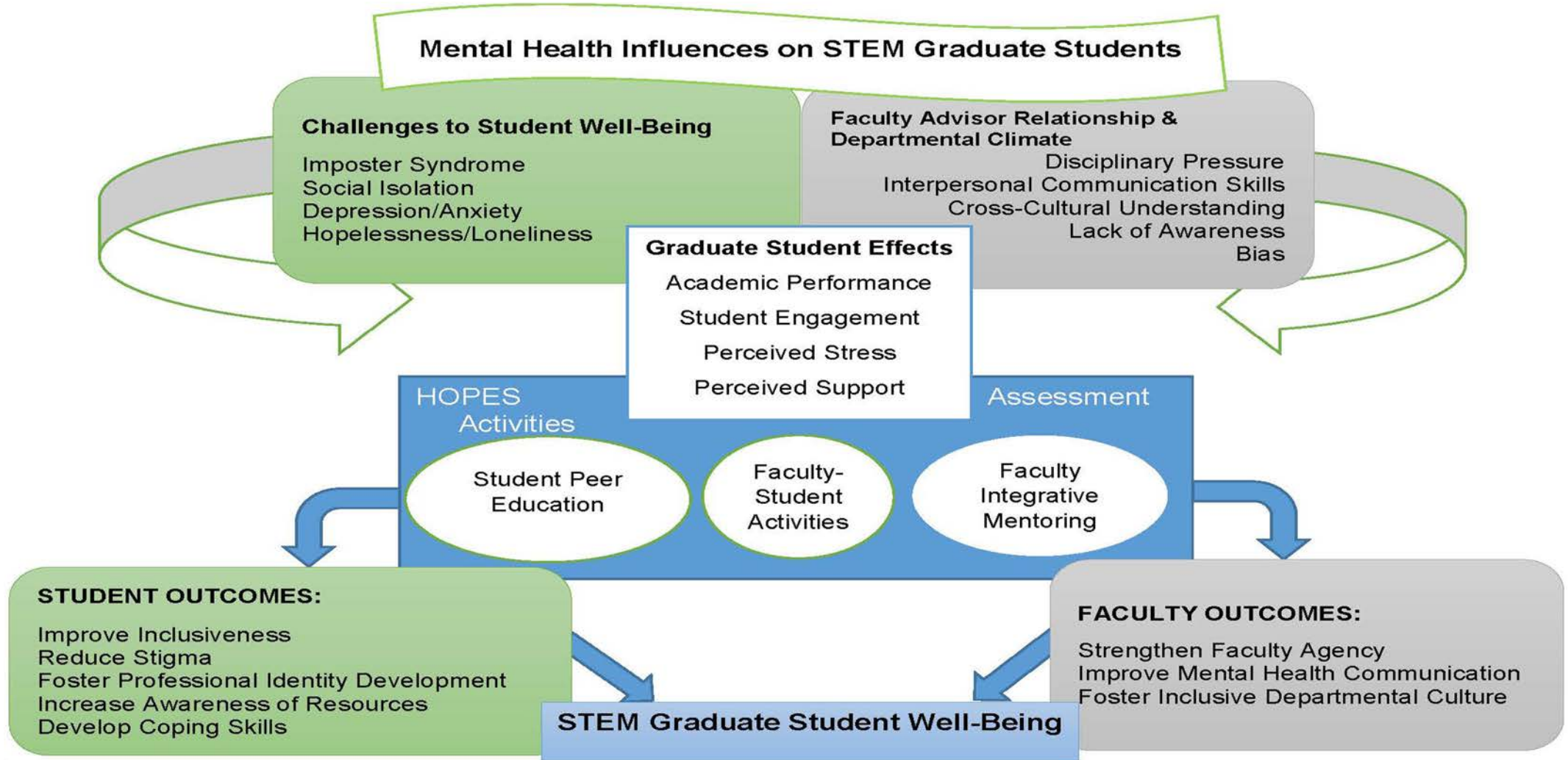
# HOPES Project Components

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- **Baseline & follow-up surveys for faculty and students (annual)**
- **Student activities: Peer Groups & Cognitive Behavioral Therapy skills**
- **Faculty activities**
- **Faculty & student joint activities (to launch this academic year)**
- **Scale-up to three other campuses in AY 2023/24**
  - Montana State University Bozeman
  - University of Idaho
  - University of the District of Columbia



# HOPES Model



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# HOPES Student Results





# What Did We Find?

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- **Peer Groups**
  - In-person format helped students feel less isolated
  - Interaction with other graduate students helped build support
  - Liked small group size
  - Continuous meetings built trust
  - Just talking was really helpful
  - Cross-disciplinary interaction helpful
  - Helped students feel less isolated with their challenges
- **CBT Training**
  - Online format unhelpful
  - Too didactic, not interactive enough



# Student Focus Group Results

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- **Graduate student experience is challenging:**
  - *“That feeling that you are alone going to school and working, sometimes it can feel like people don’t really understand...”*
- **Positive reflection on peer groups:**
  - **Problem solving:** *“Even if we felt like we were commiserating it would lead to a solution. Those were really great. I actually found it really helpful. I was interested to see how it would go at first.”*
  - **Universality:** *“Just that knowledge and knowing that we’re all in this boat together. Those feelings of that together ness just feeling that you’re not the only person who’s out there struggling just trying to make it through the day.”*
- **Negative reflection on peer groups:**
  - Time scheduling
  - Low participation



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# Student Baseline Survey Results

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- **Campus-based protective factors, respondents scored highest in:**
  - Faculty interactions and support
  - Major program mentor interest
  - Cultural Congruity
  - Social Support
- **Campus risk factors:**
  - Social Isolation (likely exacerbated by COVID restrictions)
  - Perceived Stress
  - Impostorism
  - Self-Stigma of Help-Seeking (more of an issue for men and STEM fields)
  - Depression



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# Student Survey Results: What Do They Mean?

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- **Longing for more connection with faculty, students & alumni (e.g., meals, informal interactions)**
- **Desiring more career and professional development/resources to launch careers**
- **Wanting more holistic / inclusive approach to grad program: culture**
- **Concerns about mental health / depression / anxiety and access to services**



# What do we do about it?

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- **Decrease social isolation**
- **Increase social support**
- **Campus services often don't address graduate-student needs**
- **Financial burden is hard (especially at UM)**
- **Find strategies to:**
  - **Build community on campus**
  - **Foster non-academic interactions among grad students & faculty across disciplines**
  - **Tailor counseling & other student services to fit graduate student needs**
  - **Increase graduate student stipends**
  - **Other???**



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# The Graduate Student Perspective

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## Spring 2022 Peer Group Sessions – MT HOPES

### Why Grad School?

- Employment
- It was expected/why not
- Passion



### What are the common stressors?

- Finances
  - Wages, cost of living, tuition, fees, inflation
- Institutional support, i.e. availability of GRAs/GTAs or research funding
- Work and home life balance
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation
- Impostor syndrome
- Advisors stretched thin/not enough guidance



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# Faculty Engagement in Well-being

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## The “culture” component of well- being: Student Voices

*“Often graduate students don’t know the exact question they have but rather have an area they want to discuss but end up feeling dumb and a burden when faculty don’t offer time to meet with students.”*

*“The faculty in my department need to get better at validating how busy and stressed graduate students are and start working on implementing strategies and policies to reduce that busyness and stress as much as reasonable. Right now the climate/general faculty attitude is that quite a bit of busyness and stress is typical for graduate students and typical = okay. But they don’t realize how rampant passive suicidal ideation, depression, severe anxiety, etc. is among their graduate students.”*



# Faculty Baseline Survey

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- **The Flipside: faculty, especially STEM faculty, work extraordinarily hard, and students know it:**
  - One student reported: *“How can faculty model wellness when they work 80 hours per week?”*
- **Results from Faculty Baseline Survey**
  - Concerns about high workload and limited time for mentoring
  - BUT 60% of faculty respondents had referred a student for mental health assistance
  - Concerns about their students’ financial stress
  - Desire for connections “beyond the lab”





# Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging

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- “[Faculty need to] go to diversity trainings and apply the suggestions. It will benefit everyone, not just your students that fit into those diversity categories!!”
- **Indigenous Mentoring Project (PNW Cosmos):** Since 2019, UM has offered annual workshops designed to provide context and skills for faculty advising indigenous students
  - **Spring 2022, UM encouraged faculty to sign up for a five-session workshop, the first two of which were the IMP**
  - **At Montana Tech, special IMP workshops were the first two of the five HOPES faculty workshops.**
  - The third Tech-hosted was “Systemic Change in Graduate Education: Designing for Equity” led by a national leader, Dr. Julie Posselt (USC Rossiter School of Education): 40+ attendees from UM, MSUB, Tech

***DEIB Work is  
Wellness & Mental  
Health Work***



# “Nurture New STEM Scholars”

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- **Integrative Behavioral Health Model**
  - As with physicians, how can we train faculty to be “frontline” communicators about wellness and responsive to student concerns?
- **Three-part workshop designed to enhance communication skills and strategies for interacting with advisees in the context of wellbeing**
  - Session 1: *“Making Connections & Building Context: Insights into Graduate Student Mental Health and Well Being”* (led by Bryan Cochran)
  - Session 2: *“Making Space for Faculty & Student Well Being”* (led by Holly Schleicher)
  - Session 3: *“Be the Mentor your Students Need: Communication and Wellness in Our Work”* (led by Annie Belcourt)
- **UM 36 registrants, 22 attended at least two of the three sessions**
- **MTech: 8 registered, 7 completed**



# Faculty Testimonies / Outcomes

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- **New perspectives:** Range of mental health challenges; new awareness of resources available
- **Skills acquired:** Self-monitoring communication, affect, non-verbal cues; more open and embracing of students' struggles; new techniques for empathy
  - *“My sense is that faculty are either doing [therapy] already or they’re building big barriers and they’re not dealing with that. In that case, we’re not going to reach them. And yet, what is really important is for these people to realize is how they have to deal with different students.”*
  - *“The multicultural focus was really helpful – anything that is community building and interpersonal relationship building, strategies that are more person to person instead of related to your discipline.”*



# New for Year Two

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- **Creating informal spaces for discussion among faculty**
- **Revising workshops for more interactive skill-building**
- **Possibly integrating students into role-playing**
- **Using video “pre-views” to create more space for dialogue**
- **Building more informal activities for faculty-student interaction**



# Q&A and Acknowledgements

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## Montana HOPES



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