# The Impact of Peer Support Groups on STEM Graduate Students Well-Being

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## Association for Marketing & Health Care Research

## *Enhancing Community Mental Health & Wellbeing*

# Overview

- HOPES overview, motivation & goals
- Group counseling effectiveness
- Our project
- Results
- Discussion

# Grad Student Mental Health: A National & International Problem

- **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**

# HOPES Project Goal & Objectives

Mental 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.*

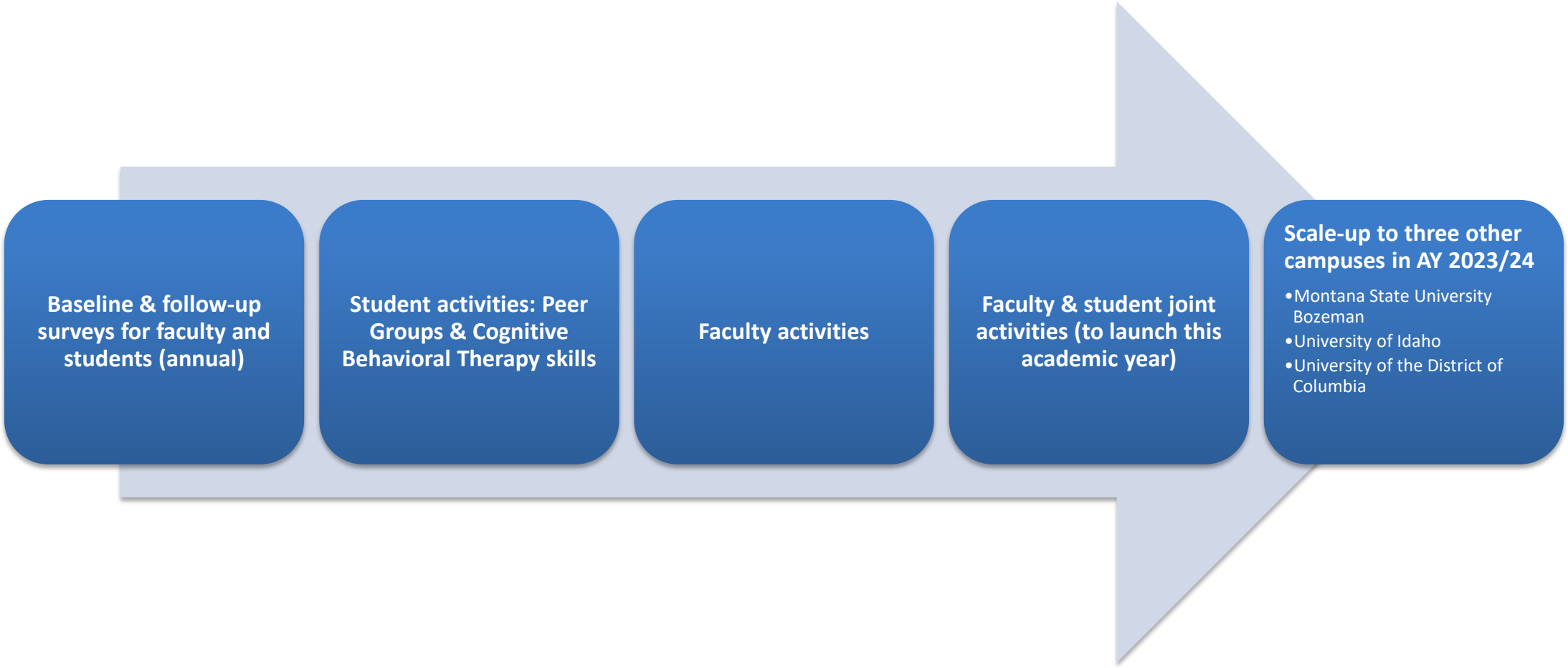
Objectives

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 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 |

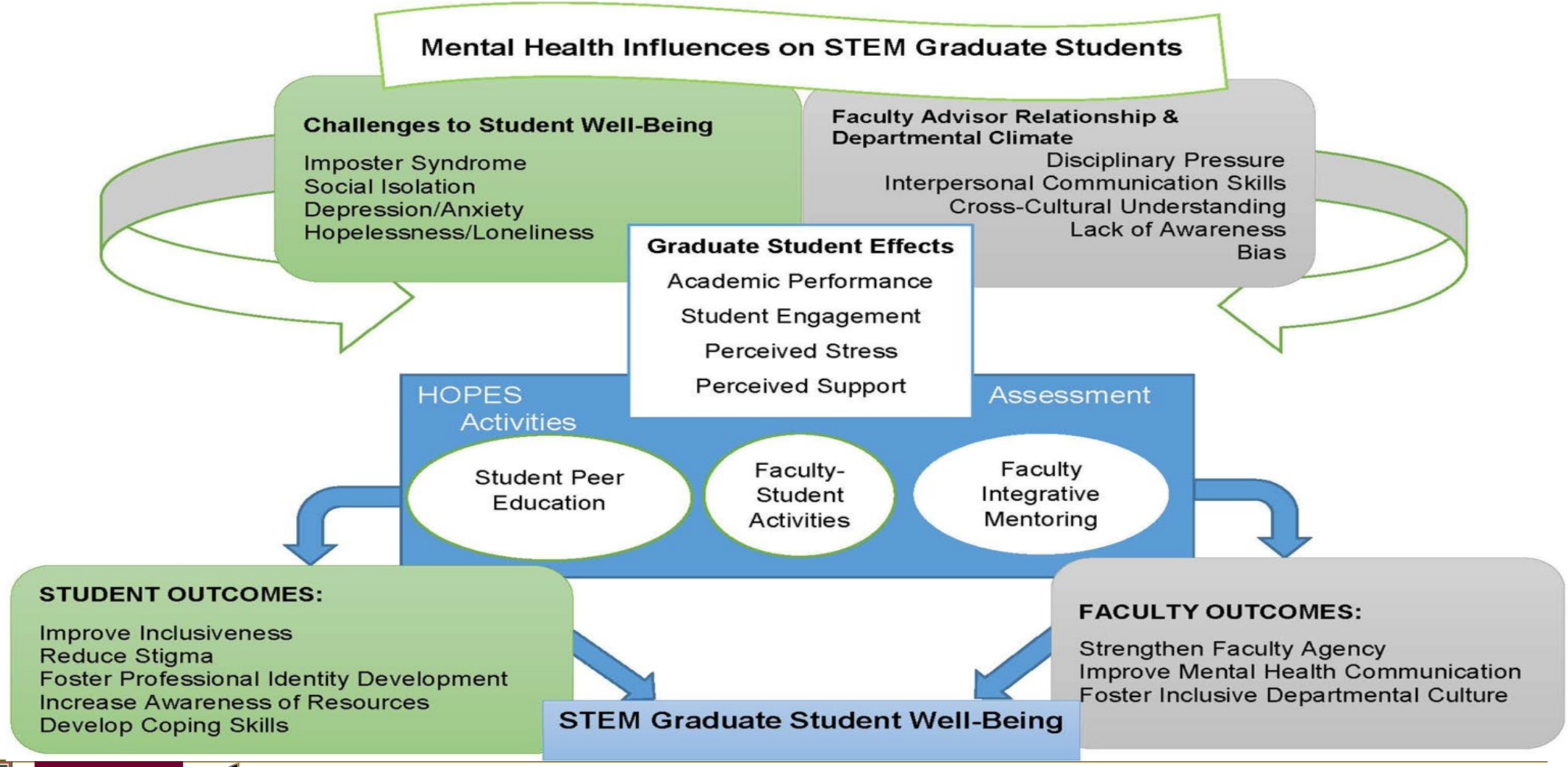
**National Science Foundation funding: $500 K, 15 August 2021 to 31 July 2024**

| | |
|---|---|
| Collaboration among Montana Tech, MSU-Billings, and UM | Just finishing year 2 |

# HOPES Project Components



# HOPES Model


Mental Health Influences on STEM Graduate Students
Challenges to Student Well-Being
Imposter Syndrome
Social Isolation
Depression/Anxiety
Hopelessness/Loneliness
Faculty Advisor Relationship & Departmental Climate
Disciplinary Pressure
Interpersonal Communication Skills
Cross-Cultural Understanding
Lack of Awareness
Bias
Graduate Student Effects
Academic Performance
Student Engagement
Perceived Stress
Perceived Support
HOPES Activities
Assessment
Student Peer Education
Faculty-Student Activities
Faculty Integrative Mentoring
STUDENT OUTCOMES:
Improve Inclusiveness
Reduce Stigma
Foster Professional Identity Development
Increase Awareness of Resources
Develop Coping Skills
FACULTY OUTCOMES:
Strengthen Faculty Agency
Improve Mental Health Communication
Foster Inclusive Departmental Culture
STEM Graduate Student Well-Being

# HOPES Peer Support Groups

# Group Counseling for College

**Group counseling has been offered on college campuses for decades as a means of serving students with specific mental health and emotional needs while they navigate the pressures of an academic environment.**

- Based on the rationale that peers have a strong influence on individual behavior (Springer, 2014).
- Level of trust and comfort with their peers that allows for more open discussions of sensitive topics (Javanmiri et al., 2013).
- More practical and cost-effective option for college counseling centers
- Can promote healthy identity development for students experiencing stressors related to identity – be it racial, gender, class-based or other status

**A meta-analysis on group counseling interventions aimed at reducing stress in university students (1431 students in 24 studies):**

- Group counseling -- using cognitive, behavioral and mindfulness approaches – was associated with decreased symptoms of anxiety and lower levels of depression and cortisol (Regehr, Glancy & Pitts, 2013).

Social support was found to explain 28% of variance in graduate student program satisfaction and 30% of general life satisfaction among doctoral students in counseling and psychology programs (Tompkins.et al., 2016).

# IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

# Methods

**Three 6-week counseling groups were offered to STEM students at 2 universities (n = 4, n = 5, n = 6)**

**Facilitated by Counselors-in-Training (CITs) and a community counselor**

- Coping skills were from a variety of counseling approaches including Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Positive Psychology.

# Methods

- **Focus Groups (n = 5)**
- **In-depth Interviews (n = 2)**
- **Questions:**
  - What was your experience participating in the peer support group?
  - Did you have any specific stresses or challenges that prompted you to take this training? Or did you identify a specific challenge to work on in the course of the training? If so, please describe.
  - Did participation impact your attitude towards your graduate school experience? If so, how?
  - Which parts of the experience were most helpful? Why?
  - What parts of the experience were least helpful? Why?
  - What were your thoughts before, during, and after the training?
  - How did the experience impact your relationships?
  - Is there anything that could have been added to the trainings that could improve the experience?

# Results

## Four broad themes emerged

- **(a) challenges of graduate school**
  - Isolation, stress, work/life balance, imposter syndrome, lack of faculty mentorship
- **(b) therapeutic benefits of the support groups:**
  - universality, problem-solving, alternative perspectives, attitudes towards help-seeking, and social support
- **(c) the difficulties associated with participating in the groups**
- **(d) recommendations for future groups**

# Benefits

- **Universality:**
  - Validation from other group members
  - Recognition one's struggles are not unique
- **Problem-solving**
  - Facilitation of problem-solving with equipment, resources
  - Research advice
- **Alternative perspectives**
  - Opportunity to connect across disciplines
  - Application of coping skills
- **Group dynamics**
  - Interchange
  - Free flowing discussion

# Student Focus Group Results

### 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

# What Did We Find?

- **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
- **By contrast, our Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Training**
  - Online format unhelpful
  - Too didactic, not interactive enough

# Other Findings

**STEM graduate students felt apprehension about the group initially BUT their feelings changed over time**

- Students felt as though the groups were a “last resort” and had low expectations regarding the benefits.
- Apprehension grew into pleasant surprise as they began to experience therapeutic benefits of group counseling.
- We are now focused on recruiting students who may be experiencing the same disenchantment regarding graduate education and mental health support.

**Change agents**

- We leave this study challenged as researchers and faculty to consider the ways in which we operate as change-agents within the system of higher education
- Students insisted something needs to change in graduate programs, upstream, to make graduate education more inclusive, health-promoting, and accessible

# What do we do about it?

- 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???

# Q&A and Acknowledgements

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