A Self-Reflective Guide to Leadership Success for Psychology Graduate Students

Contributor Bios

Douglas Knutson, PhD, LHSP, ABPP, (he/him), is the Myron Ledbetter/Bob Lemon Counseling Psychology Diversity Associate Professor and Director of Training for the Counseling Psychology Doctoral Program at Oklahoma State University. He is a Licensed Health Service Psychologist (LHSP), Board Certified in Counseling Psychology (ABPP). Dr. Knutson directs the Health, Education, and Rural Empowerment Lab, the 2022 recipient of the AMSA/GLMA LGBTQ Health Achievement Award. He serves on the American Psychological Association (APA) Committee on Rural Health and as an associate editor for the Journal of Rural Mental Health. He was the 2023 recipient of the APA Excellence in Rural Psychology Award and the 2023 Judy E. Hall Early Career Psychologist Award from the National Register of Health Service Psychologists. Many of his 49 peer-reviewed articles, 70 national and international professional presentations, and 50 regional and educational talks focus on rural LGBTQ+ health and resilience.

Nguyen Nguyen, PhD, (he/him), is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Psychology Doctoral Program at Texas A&M University. He earned his PhD in counseling psychology from Texas Tech University, with a certification in Psychological Methods and Analysis, and completed his doctoral internship at the University of California, Berkeley, Counseling and Psychological Serivces (CAPS). Dr. Nguyen's research centers on the intersection of multicultural and health psychology, with an emphasis on promoting the health and resilience of minoritized communities. He has a particular interest in the psychosocial factors influencing chronic pain outcomes among underserved populations. His research lab, the Health, Empowerment, and Advocacy Lab (HEAL), seeks to understand the complex interplay between different types of pain—physical, social, and emotional—and to identify the factors that foster healing and resilience, such as critical consciousness, work-family enrichment, social support, and hope.

Sam Jensen, BS, (she/her), is a graduate student in Mental Health Counseling at Oklahoma State University (OSU). As a member of the Health Education and Rural Empowerment Lab, she has coordinated projects and presentations exploring community-building strategies for counseling practitioners and community dynamics as influences on health, particularly among rural mental health and LGBTQ+ populations. Her interests are grounded in a commitment to health equity advocacy and understanding how behavioral health providers can partner with communities to collaboratively strengthen social support networks. She is passionate about working alongside fellow students to integrate advocacy, outreach, and leadership into the graduate behavioral health provider training experience.

Nnenna Uche, BS, (she/her), is a Counseling Psychology doctoral student at Texas A&M University. She grew up in Houston, Texas, and received her B.S. in Psychology from Santa Clara University in Bay Area, California. Her research aims are to examine key variables such as social support or lack thereof, personality and individual experiences, as well as their potential effects on college student health and wellness specifically regarding anxiety and depression. In her undergraduate senior year, she conducted research examining what predictors affect friendship quality within college students. As a member of the Health, Empowerment & Advocacy Lab, she has assisted in manuscripts exploring non-native accents and their effects on mental health and vocational aspirations. Nnenna is interested in community outreach– integrating psychological research and public health interventions to improve physical and mental health outcomes for underserved communities. In her free time, she enjoys practicing yoga, watching movies, and trying new restaurants.

This project was funded by an American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) Student Diversity Initiative Award. For more information about this award, please see: https://www.apa.org/about/awards/apags-student-diversity?tab=3

Table of Contents

1. Introduction to Workbook
2. Chapter 1: Selecting a Lens
    a. Information: Discuss the oppressive environment of graduate training and the complex, complicated process of maintaining hope and striving for success in an environment that works against that success. Review possible lenses: acceptance-based, commitment-oriented, affirmation-driven, etc.
    b. Case Vignette:
    c. Activity:
    d. Reflection Questions
3. Chapter 2: The Current State of Things
    a. Information: Discuss the competing systems, demands, loyalties, motivations, and pressures that shape how universities maintain supremacy and marginalize students.
    b. Case Vignette: Talking to an Administrator while Navigating University Values
    c. Activity: Writing a proposal for change.
    d. Reflection Questions
4. Chapter 3: Resilience and Resistance
    a. Information: Discuss resilience and resistance strategies and how to leverage both. Resistance as a strength and positive action (not being contrary or "difficult").
    b. Case Vignette
    c. Activity
    d. Reflection Questions
5. Chapter 4: Allyship and Accompliceship
    a. Information: Calling for accountability over performativity.
    b. Case Vignette
    c. Activity
    d. Reflection Questions
6. Resources and References
    a. Bibliography
    b. Notes

Introduction

This workbook is designed to equip you with the tools to navigate the complexities of academia, particularly within environments that may present unique challenges. It is born out of a recognized need to provide specific, concrete strategies to foster success and well-being in the face of systemic pressures.

This workbook is a product of the grant-funded project, "Cultivating Success for Diverse Psychology Graduate Students in Adverse Educational Environments." The primary objective of this initiative is to translate research and identified best practices into tangible empowerment strategies. The workbook was originally designed to be used at a conference held at Oklahoma State University aimed at translating research from diverse scholars into practical, skills-based approaches to student leadership. It is now available nationwide for self-study and use in other graduate psychology programs.

Background

The landscape of higher education is evolving, and with it, the experiences of students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Recent events, such as executive orders and legislation impacting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, have created environments that can feel unsupportive or even hostile. These actions can undermine efforts to recruit, retain, and train a diverse student body, which is essential for the advancement of fields like psychology. This workbook acknowledges these realities and aims to provide tools for not just surviving but thriving.

The impetus for this guide stems from ongoing dialogues and a commitment to addressing the concerns voiced by students, particularly BIPOC students and those with multiple marginalized identities. It recognizes that many graduate programs, despite their best intentions, can perpetuate systems that marginalize and create additional burdens for diverse students. This workbook is a direct response to the call for more than performative gestures of support. It is an effort to shift towards a more visible, proactive, and accomplice-oriented approach to fostering student success.

The Purpose of This Workbook

Drawing from research on microaffirmation, resistance, resilience, and identity-affirmation, this guide will help you:

- **Understand the Landscape:** Develop a clearer understanding of the systemic forces at play within academic institutions.

- **Select Your Lens:** Explore various frameworks—such as acceptance-based, commitment-oriented, or affirmation-driven approaches—to find what resonates with your journey and helps you maintain hope and strive for success.
- **Build Resilience and Embrace Resistance:** Learn to differentiate between resilience in the face of adversity and resistance as a proactive, positive force for change. This workbook reframes resistance not as being difficult, but as a demonstration of strength and a catalyst for positive action.
- **Cultivate Allyship and Accompliceship:** Move beyond performative allyship towards genuine accompliceship, fostering accountability and meaningful support networks.
- **Develop Leadership Skills:** By engaging with the material and activities, you will cultivate your ability to advocate for marginalized populations and develop a strong leadership identity.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is designed to be a self-reflective journey. Each chapter will provide:

- **Information:** Grounding concepts and discussions of relevant issues.
- **Case Vignettes:** Real-world scenarios to illustrate the concepts discussed.
- **Activities:** Practical exercises to help you apply the strategies and integrate them into your own experiences.
- **Reflection Questions:** Prompts to encourage deeper personal insight and application.

The ultimate goal is to help you not only navigate your graduate studies successfully but also to emerge as an empowered leader and advocate within the field of psychology. The grant proposal that led to this workbook emphasized the need for "key empowerment strategies, specific, concrete strategies that can be used to empower, support, and appropriately respond to the needs of diverse students." This workbook is the fulfillment of that promise.

The Importance of Self-Care and Safety

We recognize the courage and dedication it takes to pursue graduate studies, especially in environments that may not always feel welcoming. This guide is intended to be a source of strength, a catalyst for growth, and a companion on your path to cultivating success. We hope it provides you with information, opportunities for strategizing, and a sense of mutual support as you integrate these themes into your own practice and identify actionable steps for your future.

That said, it takes energy to engage, resist, and advocate. You may not have that energy right now, or you may find yourself burned out after taking on some of the tasks in this workbook. Please take time to check in with yourself as you engage with these materials. Feel free to take breaks and step away from the work as needed. Your safety is incredibly important. It is

important to remember that your work is valuable, and so are you. Rest is resistance and taking care of yourself is revolutionary.

Take a moment to breathe, reflect, and check your energy levels. If you need support, please call a friend or reach out to other sources of support. When you are ready, if you are ready, please turn the page and start this journey. Remember, you can take a break at any time.

Chapter 1:

Selecting a Lens

Chapter 1: Selecting a Lens

Scholars continue to identify and describe the overlapping, intersecting sources of stress that uniquely impact marginalized graduate students, above and beyond the baseline distress faced by people in graduate training programs (e.g., Knutson et al., 2022). Many readers of this workbook are most likely able to call to mind examples of barriers they have faced throughout their graduate educational journey (or leading up to the pursuit of a graduate education).

Examples of challenges facing psychology graduate students more specifically are well documented (Diaz et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2020; Matsuno et al., 2022). It is probably unsurprising that even in psychology programs that include an emphasis on multicultural competence students report regularly experiencing microaggressions, a lack of support, and even outright discrimination (e.g., Matsuno et al., 2022). In response, student leaders may develop specialized strategies, coping skills, and resistive behaviors that help them survive oppressive academic environments (Diaz et al., 2023).

In other words, graduate training takes a disproportionate toll on marginalized students relative to the general student body, full stop, and it would be a disservice to graduate student leaders to pretend otherwise. It is important to recognize the pressures, barriers, and challenges faced by marginalized students. This workbook is written with that awareness.

Scholars suggest that, although it is not possible to ignore the real impact of unfair stress, it is also possible to embrace positive aspects of resilience, resistance, affirmation, and euphoria (e.g., Koch et al., 2025; Matsuno & Israel, 2018). Research indicates that graduate students tend to notice positive aspects of their graduate experience when they are offered a positive frame (Koch et al., 2020). For example, when graduate students reflect on and look for microaffirmations, they are more likely to notice them in the graduate environment. Again, microaffirmations are not a replacement, negation of, or antidote to microaggressions (Koch et al., 2025), but they offer a shift in focus that foregrounds the positive alongside the negative aspects of graduate school training.

As current or future psychology graduate students, you are probably familiar with a lot of different lenses that psychologists have at their disposal. In theoretical terms, a lens is the theoretical, ideological, or assumption-based interpretive frame that a person uses to assess their surroundings and experiences. Just like a pair of glasses can change your vision, a lens can shape

how you see the world around you. In some cases, these lenses are called theories (e.g., Existential Theory, Cognitive-Behavioral Theory, Feminist Theory, and so on). People who use a behavioral lens tend to define the graduate student environment as connected to behaviors. People who use a feminist lens, may view graduate school systems in terms of the power they transmit, hold, and maintain. For the purposes of this exercise, we suggest that some lenses are deficit focused and others are rooted in positive or adaptive principles.

In the exercise for this chapter, you will be asked to reflect on the sort of lens you currently use to interpret the graduate school environment. How does that lens impact the way you understand, react to, and contribute to the opportunities, barriers, challenges, and successes that surround you on a daily/monthly/yearly basis? Is your lens helping you or holding you back (or both)?

After exploring the implications and impact of your current lens, you will be encouraged to try a different lens. In particular, you will be asked to view your experiences through a positive-psychology-based, empowerment-oriented, or identity-affirming lens. How might your perspective shift if you view your experiences from a different angle?

Before moving to the worksheet, take a moment to read and reflect on the following vignette. Examine ways your experience may resemble or differ from the example provided. Please keep an open, but critical mind. It is important to maintain balance and mindfulness when exploring oppressive dynamics and opportunities for growth in a multicultural context.

Case Vignette

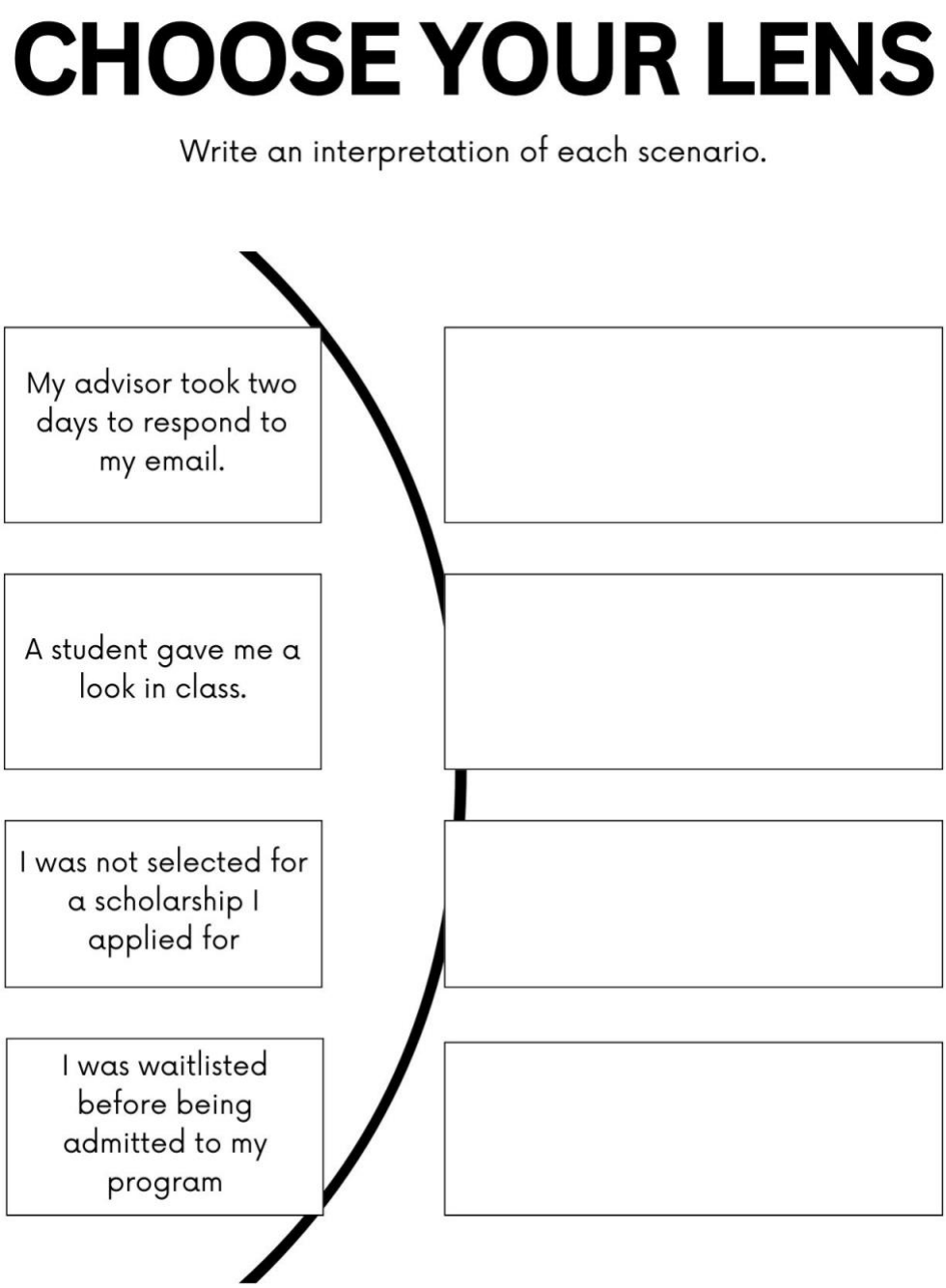
Mara (they/them) is a 25-year-old graduate student in clinical psychology at a large, public, land grant university, who identifies as Black, trans, queer, and neurodivergent. They were excited when they received their letter of admission to their program because their offer came with the opportunity to work with a leading scholar in anxiety and depression treatment. However, their excitement soon gave way to frustration when, at the lab orientation a week before their first semester, a student in the lab said, "My friend applied at the same time you did and I guess she did not get admitted because she was not diverse enough." Mara tried not to let the comment get to them, but it kept popping up in their head whenever anything went wrong.

Even after a few negative experiences at the beginning of the semester, Mara tried to keep an upbeat perspective. They were excited to be in graduate school and they were eager to learn everything they could. As a first-generation graduate student, they were not sure what graduate school would be like, but they expected that it would be transformative and empowering. However, their classes and experiences were decidedly underwhelming. One faculty member never handed out a syllabus and did not show up to class most of the time. Another instructor used articles from the 1980's to teach outdated concepts and interventions.

By the end of their first semester, Mara's faith in graduate training was at an all-time low. They tried to email their professor over the holiday break, but he was slow to respond. They got a bill in the mail from the school, but when they called the Bursar, they were informed that the letter was sent in error. They tried to enroll in an elective for the fall that they thought would boost their career, but the class was full and the instructor would not add a seat to the course.

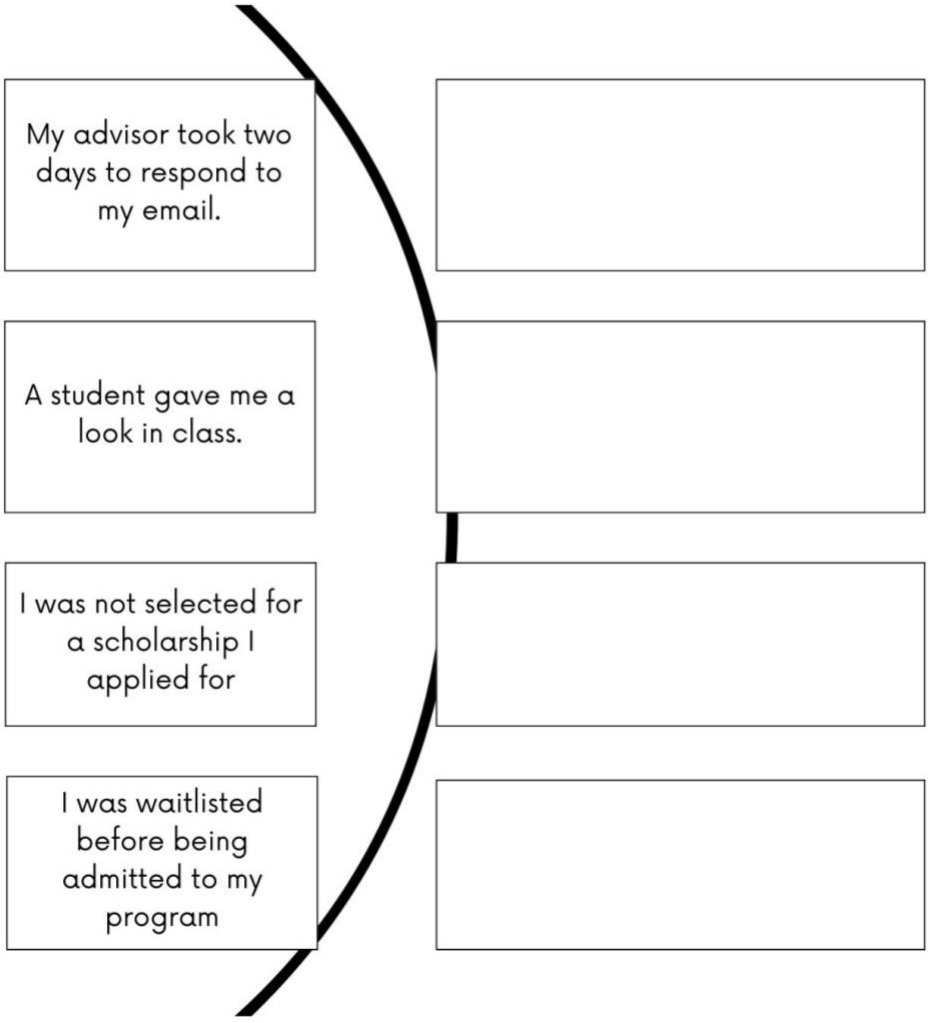
The lens they were handed at the beginning of the semester (you are only here because of your identities) kicked in and they started feeling as if they were not wanted by their program. They reached out to the other students in their cohort via group text and discovered that their experiences were shared by other students. Everyone had gotten the billing notice, and most faculty were away from their offices over the break.

Activity


CHOOSE YOUR LENS
Write an interpretation of each scenario.
My advisor took two days to respond to my email.
A student gave me a look in class.
I was not selected for a scholarship I applied for
I was waitlisted before being admitted to my program

CHOOSE YOUR LENS

Write a **new** interpretation of each scenario.



Reflection Questions

- How do your personal experiences and identities influence the lens through which you interpret academic interactions?
- When have you found yourself interpreting an ambiguous situation through a particular lens? What personal, cultural, or contextual factors might have influenced that interpretation?
- How do institutional factors or dynamics at your university influence which interpretive lens feels most protective or useful?
- What does it look like for you to sustain motivation, hope, or purpose while navigating oppressive systems that work against your success?
- When might it be helpful to check in with yourself about which lens you're using and whether it's serving your values and goals?
- What lens or combination of lenses resonates most with you right now?

Chapter 2:

The Current State of Things

Chapter 2: The Current State of Things

In chapter one, we discussed the many stressors, barriers, and challenges that can be erected against the success of minoritized graduate students. Exploring and rebalancing your lens can be an important first step toward building your identity as a graduate psychology student leader, because it opens you up to constructive, adaptive possibilities and solutions. The next step is to use that modified lens to assess key barriers and create plans to deal with them.

Just like the lens exercise carried with it the danger of negating or ignoring real problems, this exercise has risks too. Marginalized people are often asked to speak for everyone with identities similar to theirs or to come up with solutions to the problems that they face. Unsurprisingly, oppressors sometimes ask oppressed people to solve their own oppression. As a result, graduate students who are already doing the labor of staying in a graduate program and dealing with even higher stress levels, are then asked to do the labor of fixing the system. That is not the point of this exercise.

Instead, this exercise is grounded in themes drawn from Acceptance and Commitment or ACT Theory (Hayes et al., 1999) or the idea that (a) some things are not going to change just because we see them differently and (b) having agency and freedom, even in the face of things that seem impossible, can be healing. In other words, graduate programs have failed to adequately meet the needs of marginalized students and marginalized graduate students have the power to reclaim the educational space and advocate for change (e.g., Diaz et al., 2023). Although working toward the elimination of underlying biases is essential, applying ACT principles concurrently can offer tools for mitigating the impact of oppressive experiences (e.g., Banks et al., 2021; Brewster et al., 2013).

That ability to press for change takes energy, and change takes time. In the activity we included with this chapter, we ask you to check in with yourself and make sure you have the capacity to engage. It is okay if you do not. Please take care of yourself and save your energy when needed. You can always come back to this activity when you have space to do so.

When you are ready, the plan in this chapter can help you prepare to advocate for change. The first step toward resisting oppressive systems, seeing them for what they are, and pushing for change is to ground yourself in your own strengths, abilities, and the beauty of who you are (e.g., Knutson et al., 2020). The second is to identify how your work toward change connects with your values and goals. Then, it is possible to clearly identify the problem, how it relates to the graduate program, and identify creative solutions.

It is also important to recognize that advocacy does not operate in a vacuum. Connecting with community, organizing, and drawing strength from people in community with you are essential parts of sustained work toward change. The change plan below includes these essential community aspects.

Before you write your own plan, please read over the vignette. As you reflect on the example we provided, think about which approaches would work in your context and which strategies would not. Revise the vignette as you read it to better fit your context and the challenges you face.

Case Vignette

Samir (he/him) is a 28-year-old international doctoral student at a small university in the Midwest. Originally from Southeast Asia, Samir chose to pursue graduate education in counseling psychology because of the program's stated commitment to training socially conscious mental health professionals and advocates for the field. The university's public-facing priorities included a stated commitment to building a connected and inclusive academic community, strengthening his trust in the department's openness to integrating his voice as a student.

While taking a course on therapy with clients presenting with trauma, he noticed a dominating Western framing of how trauma, stress, and healing occur that went unacknowledged by the instructor until a fellow classmate of color pointed it out. Then, even when class discussions began to acknowledge the limitations of Western-based trauma frameworks, alternative perspectives were clustered in a monolithic "non-Western" category and treated as supplementary add-ons rather than essential content. These acknowledgements did not effectively open an ongoing conversation about how culturally biased approaches to care impact conceptualization, treatment, diagnosis, and assessment.

Although his student handbook emphasized the value the program placed on sharing diverse perspectives and cultivating collaborative learning environments, Samir noticed that content critiques and novel insights from students on the social, political, and generational contexts of trauma were often overlooked. He observed that attempts made by himself and fellow students of color to discuss the dominance of Eurocentric models in the curriculum and how these reinforced barriers to effective treatment for marginalized communities were met with skepticism or brushed aside. Meanwhile, anecdotal contributions from his white peers about effective practices were enthusiastically received and used to drive additional class discussion.

Samir began to feel disillusioned with the program's stated mission to recruit diverse perspectives and promote critical engagement. Class conversations about trauma rarely named the complexities of cultural nuance. He wondered when he would begin to see his clinical training adopt instructional practices that more intentionally invite scholarly discussion on non-Western understandings of trauma and better prepare graduates of his program to provide culturally and contextually informed care.

Activity

Change Plan

First, identify your strengths, skills, and advantages you hold because of your identity and experiences.

Then, identify when you are most likely to have the energy to advocate. What indicators inform your decision (e.g., stress levels, access to supports, demands on your time, time of year, etc.)?

Next, clarify your values and goals as a psychologist in training.

Now, clearly define and describe a problem in your graduate psychology program that impacts marginalized students.

Identify specific needs and support systems offered by students who are in community with you.

Explore ways that your values and the needs of affected students are consistent with program/university priorities and goals.

Propose a well-defined and feasible solution/way of connecting solutions to common priorities.

Provide evidence of the need for change and potential benefits.

Reflect on what the impact might be if the change does not happen and what care, support, or grounding you might need.

Reflection Questions

- What impacts your energy to advocate?
- How do you navigate prioritizing your well-being and staying committed to advocacy and justice work in your program?
- How do you know when you are moving toward acceptance in the face of institutional harm?
- What are other ways you can use the principles of the change plan activity to step into an advocate role in your program?
- What are some signs that you are living consistent with your values?

Chapter 3:

Resilience and Resistance

Chapter 3: Resilience and Resistance

So far, we have only indirectly mentioned the incredible resilience and potential to thrive that graduate students possess. The exercise in chapter two ended with an opportunity to reflect on how you might respond if your efforts to self-advocate and press for change to unacknowledged. One strategy graduate students use to consistently push back against oppressive forces in graduate education is positive resistance (Diaz et al., 2023).

We use the term "positive resistance" to differentiate adaptive forms of resistance from clinical conceptualizations of resistance that usually view a client's push back against treatment as maladaptive. In general, resistance is not viewed as a "good" thing, but researchers are beginning to reframe resistance as an adaptive skill (see Robinson & Schmitz, 2021).

Emerging research on resistance indicates that resistance strategies may be accessed simultaneously and exist along a continuum. So far, we have acknowledged that it is important for marginalized psychology students to engage in self-care, engage in advocacy when they have the capacity, and acknowledge the real impacts of oppressive environments. It turns out that resistance may help marginalized people calibrate their response to oppression to the environment.

As we did in previous chapters, we encourage diverse psychology graduate student leaders to be mindful and intentional about their interactions with faculty, staff, students, and other university personnel. We draw on our current research projects to offer a path forward and specific strategies students can use as self-advocates and advocates for others in their programs. Please note that these exercises are based on preliminary data and developing theory.

The following vignette illustrates some aspects of adaptive resistance. As you read over it, please reflect on ways it fits or does not fit your own experience. How would you revise the vignette to make it more consistent with the lived experiences of graduate students?

Case Vignette

Veronica (she/her) frequently sat in the back corner of her classroom trying to ignore the knot in her throat when the topic of marginalized individual experiences came up during her cultural competence in clinical settings course. She frequently listened as a classmate confidently misinterpreted the experiences of communities she grew up in, compressing them into the stereotypes cloaked in academic language. When she looked around the room, the professor along with other students nodded approvingly.

As a first-generation Afro-Latino student, Veronica had spent the last three years learning to pick her battles when it came to the topic of multiculturalism. In the beginning she was outspoken and challenged professors on nearly every racially biased comment or assumption. But the cost of speaking up had become overwhelming quickly. She was labeled as "angry, never satisfied, and whiny" to other students, which caused isolation even among those in her cohort.

So she adapted.

She began organizing informal meetups for other marginalized students in the program- quiet meeting where they could share their frustrations without explanation, share resources, and remind each other that they weren't alone. They drafted a proposal to revise the multicultural goals around inclusion. When presenting her research goals she infused strength-based approaches to mental health in communities often discussing only in terms of risk.

Her resistance wasn't always loud anymore- it was constant, tactical, and deliberate. In a system not built to honor her, Veronica learned to persist- not by conforming, but by

Activity

Below, you will find several dimensions of resistance that marginalized individuals may consider when faced with oppression. Please begin by writing a scenario you have faced or might face on the line below. Then place an X on the lines below indicating how much of each strategy you might use to resist the dynamic(s) listed in your scenario.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Value Incongruent <----------->Value Congruent

Direct Comments <----------->Side Comments

Foreground Visibility <----------->Deemphasize Visibility

Escalate <----------> Deescalate

Engage <----------> Disengage

Proactive <----------> Reactive

Reflection Questions

- Have you contemplated positive resistance in the past? What influenced that process?
- What are ways that drawing from positive strategies can be useful to you in challenges currently present in your institutional climate?
- How do you define “value congruent” in the context of positive resistance?
- What other factors shape your positive resistance as a graduate student?

Chapter 4:

Allyship and Accompliceship

Chapter 4: Allyship and Accompliceship

You have probably read and heard a lot about the importance of allyship. You may have benefitted from the work of an ally or advocated for someone within or outside the communities with which you feel connected. It is highly likely that you have advocated for yourself. If you have, you know that allyship can be emotionally and relationally challenging, difficult, and marked by moments of rupture and repair (Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021). In other words, it is a creative, messy, and beautiful process that requires an immense amount of bravery.

Allyship is an important component of social justice and is part of ethical psychological practice (e.g., Estrada et al., 2017). However, in the age of social media and given the rise of influencers, it can also come across as performative and fleeting. You have probably noticed how quickly support for marginalized communities can evaporate when social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts fall out of vogue.

Given that allyship can be temporary and performative, some scholars have started calling for behavioral health professionals to behave more like accomplices (Johnson et al., 2022) and for graduate programs to begin shaping actionable advocacy skills during graduate training (e.g., Singh et al., 2023). There are ongoing debates about the right terminology to use for this move beyond allyship (accomplice has negative connotations of guilt and wrongdoing), but accompliceship includes a "skin in the game" component that is often missing from ally behaviors. In other words, accomplices stand up for others in ways that put them at risk of social backlash and even a degree of discrimination or oppression.

Scholars have indicated that adopting a co-conspiration framing as a student can facilitate stronger graduate community cohesion and systems-level change that benefits marginalized students (e.g., Hanchey et al., 2022). Notably, the positive impacts of adopting this accomplice motive extend beyond the program climate. For instance, emerging research with trans and nonbinary people in rural areas of conservative states indicate that accomplice behaviors are likely to have a more positive and lasting impact on members of marginalized communities (Nelson et al., in preparation). Across various domains, accomplice behaviors are associated with creating a platform for proactive, sustainable, meaningful change.

As we reach the end of this workbook, we want you to walk away with specific strategies and a deeper awareness of your own ally orientation. We want to equip you to design and engage in activities that maximize emotional, cognitive, and behavioral growth for you and those around you. As we have discussed throughout this workbook, work toward positive change takes energy and balance. We believe accomplice behaviors help change-makers and graduate psychology leaders develop sustainable strategies for change.

Before you reflect on your own goals as an advocate and/or accomplice, take a moment to reach over the following vignette. How is the student in the example meeting their own needs? How

are they meeting the needs of others? How could they further increase the sustainability of their advocacy work?

Case Vignette

Margaret (she/her) is a white, 31-year-old first-year doctoral student in counseling psychology. She began her studies excited about building helping skills and giving back to underserved populations. Despite being well-intentioned, her mindset was rooted in a savior-oriented self-image that she had not yet recognized.

While simultaneously enrolled in multicultural counseling and counseling theories coursework, Margaret realized that she had positioned herself as a future expert for her clients rather than a collaborator alongside them. Learning about more community-based frameworks for conceptualizing clinical work and advocacy struck a chord with her heart for connection and interest in putting action into her equity values. Although it initially felt uncomfortable, she began to examine how the power and privilege her identities carry may appear in the therapy space. As she developed this awareness, she also started to question how her positionality was showing up in her academic relationships.

One of her research labs was well-known in her region for hosting a recurring "Ethics for Contemporary Psychologists" speaker series. During a lab meeting, a team member raised the concern that most of the guest speakers were white, cisgender, and self-employed, holding identities that did not reflect those of many students or the diverse audience the series aimed to reach. She noted how this lack of representation also limited student access to relatable role models and perpetuated invisibility. Margaret felt compelled to jump in to propose modifications to the events, but she paused to reflect on what she had learned about connecting with community as an early stage of driving change.

After reaching out to lab members with marginalized identities to check in on their perspectives, she was invited to join a small group of students organizing their own series of community-informed dialogues about therapy work. They had plans to coordinate with diverse practitioners and build an online database of publicly accessible training insights. Margaret took on responsibilities that matched the group's needs, her energy level, and her desire to grow as a changemaker. Following the leadership of the students piloting the project, she also began leaning into her privilege strategically by advocating for support from faculty and other students. She observed how providing targeted, actionable support to ongoing efforts to uplift marginalized voices (instead of developing her own solution) was a step toward practicing accompliceship rather than performative allyship.

Activity

Becoming an accomplice involves balancing your own needs, values, and identities with a culturally humble and empathetic focus on the needs, values, and identities of others. Below, write down one thing you could do to become an accomplice for other marginalized students in your program. Then evaluate that idea by placing an X on the dashed lines, indicating how your idea splits the difference between your needs and the needs of others. Then write an updated idea, based on any insights you gain.

Original Idea

_____

Brings Attention to Me ---------- Brings Attention to Issue

Is About Me ----------Is About Others

I Gain a Lot---------- Others Gain a Lot

Implements a Sustainable Plan----------Is an Immediate, Temporary Fix

Requires Energy from Me----------Requires Energy from Others

Is Consistent with my Values----------Is Inconsistent with my Values

Updated Idea

_____

Reflection Questions

- In what ways might graduate programs (even unintentionally) perpetuate surface-level allyship?
- How might cultural humility influence or inform accomplice behaviors?
- How do you know when you have moved past performativity in your efforts to become an advocate?

References and Resources

References

Banks, K. H., Goswami, S., Goodwin, D., Petty, J., Bell, V., & Musa, I. (2021). Interrupting internalized racial oppression: A community based ACT intervention. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, *20*, 89-93.

Brewster, M. E., Moradi, B., DeBlaere, C., & Velez, B. L. (2013). Navigating the borderlands: the roles of minority stressors, bicultural self-efficacy, and cognitive flexibility in the mental health of bisexual individuals. *Journal of Counseling psychology*, *60*(4), 543.

Diaz, E. B., Goldbach, C., Hardy, C., Watson, T., Chambers-Baltz, S., Knutson, D., & Dykema, S. (2023). Resistance in supervision: A qualitative study of training experiences among multiethnic women. *The Counseling Psychologist.* https://doi.org/10.1177/00110000231205039

Estrada, D., Singh, A. A., & Harper, A. J. (2017). Becoming an ally: Personal, clinical, and school-based social justice interventions. *Affirmative Counseling with LGBTQI+ People*, 343-358.

Hanchey, J. N., Gillespie, S., & Ortiz-Martinez , A.-L. (2022). Graduate School ls a Human Experience of Struggling, Celebrating, and Striving Together . In *Resilience, Relationships, and Success in Communication Graduate Studies* (1st ed., pp. 152–162). Cognella Academic Publishing.

Johnson, K. F., Sparkman-Key, N. M., Meca, A., & Tarver, S. Z. (Eds.). (2022). *Developing anti-racist practices in the helping professions: Inclusive theory, pedagogy, and application.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Knutson, D., Kertz, S., Chambers-Baltz, S., Christie, M., Harris, E., & Perinchery, R. (2020). A pilot test of a text message based transgender and non-binary affirmative cognitive behavioral intervention for anxiety and depression. Advance online publication. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity.* https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000438

Knutson, D., Matsuno, E., Goldbach, C., Hashtpari, H., & Smith, N. G. (2022). Advocating for transgender and nonbinary affirmative spaces in graduate education. *Higher Education.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00673-5

Koch, J. M., **Knutson, D.**, Lee, H-S, Burdine, K., Robitschek, C., Wang, K., & Shin, J. (2025). Microaffirmations as positive social actions. *Journal of Prevention and Health Promotion.* https://doi.org/10.1177/26320770241309101

Koch, J. M., Knutson, D., Loche, L., Loche, R. W., Lee, H. S., & Federici, D. J. (2020). A qualitative inquiry of microaffirmation experiences among culturally diverse graduate students. *Current Psychology.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-00811-3

Lee, H. S., **Knutson, D.,** Brown, C., Koch, J., & Keyes, C. (2022). The cross-cultural practicum training experiences of international counseling students in the U.S. [special issue] *The Counseling Psychologist.* https://doi.org/10.1177/00110000221100825

Matsuno, E., Hashtpari, H., Domínguez, Jr., S., Maroney, M. R., Gonzalez, K. A., & **Knutson, D.** (2022). "There's no real readmap that I know of": Experiences of transgender and nonbinary graduate students in counseling psychology programs. *Journal of Counseling Psychology.* https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000647

Matsuno, E., & Israel, T. (2018). Psychological Interventions Promoting Resilience Among Transgender Individuals: Transgender Resilience Intervention Model (TRIM). *The Counseling Psychologist.* https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000018787261

Robinson, B. A., & Schmitz, R. M., Beyond resilience: Resistance in the lives of LGBTQ youth. *Sociology Compass*. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12947

Singh, M. N., Roberts, M. C., McKinney, W. S., Kelly, S., Ortega, A., Doyle, R., & Tampke, E. C. (2023). Advocacy as a professional competency in psychology. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *17*(4), 414.