

Between Bedtime and Deadlines: Making Space for Graduate Student Parents

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Introduction and Need for Idea

“I feel like I don’t belong...I always felt like I was on an island when I taught agriculture, but this feels different...it feels worse.” This was the worrisome comment one of our team members uttered to their advisor the week before their first semester of graduate school and reflected the feeling of isolation many graduate student-parents (GSPs) know all too well (James, 2020; Springer et al., 2009). This problem is often exacerbated by structural inflexibility, a lack of role models, and the pressure to minimize and hide their parenting identities (Estes, 2011; Theisen et al., 2018; Tram et al., 2025). Additionally, many GSPs face added stressors, such as time scarcity and financial insecurity, without access to support systems (Dyk, 1987; Johansen, 1996; Springer, 2009). To make matters worse, institutions often reinforce expectations to position caregiving and parenthood as incompatible with graduate student success, leaving GSPs, like us, to feel invisible, overwhelmed, and excluded from our academic communities (Domosh & Seager, 2001). While some universities may offer limited resources, research has reported that services, such as childcare and mentoring, are insufficient and inaccessible, leaving the needs of many GSPs unmet (Devenish et al., 2009; Lewis Cline et al., 2020).

Past studies have suggested peer support could help mitigate these challenges, as graduate student relationships reduce stress, affirm identities, and improve academic commitment (Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Collier & Blanchard, 2023). Yet, the role of support and peer groups among GSPs remains an untouched area of research (Oddone Paolucci et al., 2021). As GSPs, we chose to seek solutions to our difficult experiences and collaborate to build something different. Although we initially banded together to support each other in our times of need, our goal quickly shifted to reimagining what graduate school could look like for others like us. In doing so, we sought an experience-driven innovation, utilizing a participatory approach to engage with the GSP experience to create the change we needed (Meehan et al., 2023).

How it Works

This innovative idea was inspired following a series of conversations between two full-time graduate students within the same department during which they discussed the struggles of managing parenting responsibilities alongside the demands of graduate school. While advice was exchanged, our conversations revealed a perceived stigma surrounding talking about parenting in graduate school, thus leading to connections at conferences and the creation of our group.

The objective is to build a community of support for graduate student-parents (GSPs) where they can freely speak about the joys and challenges of navigating both parenting and graduate school. This shared sense of community (Tang et al., 2016), can contribute to well-being, allows individuals to show up as their authentic selves, and promotes deeper mutual understanding (Batchelor et al., 2020).

To encourage this conversation, our group of GSPs from multiple institutions scheduled virtual meetings on Microsoft Teams for one hour each week. Each meeting has an agenda that is sent through email shortly before the meeting that group members can edit. The meetings begin with brief updates on our children, the milestones they have reached, challenges faced in balancing

our dual role, and daily anecdotes from our lives as parents. This is then followed by discussions around our research proposal following the agenda. Other topics of discussion included advice and implementation of other research projects as there are group members just starting in the field of research. Because we wear both hats, our meetings led to many of our children *attending* our meetings. Their presence in these virtual meetings served as a reminder of the complex realities GSPs face and fostered a supportive environment where parenting while in graduate school was acknowledged and normalized. One of our goals is to present a research paper on the creation of this community at the National American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) meeting and subsequently create a peer workshop to serve other GSPs.

Results to Date and Implications

Three meetings have been held virtually for 60 minutes a piece to shepherd this innovative idea. The group currently consists of four GSPs representing three institutions. During this short trial to foster a safe virtual community for graduate students who are parents, 2/3rd of the GSP groups' children also *attended* the meetings. The group meets virtually to share research ideas, parenting stories, and the struggles and joys associated with balancing our dual role. The meetings have resulted in the collaboration and progression of two poster proposals for AAAE conference and one research article proposal for JAE submission. Building on the foundation of the multi-institution community design, we project this innovative idea could serve 15 Grad Student Parents in the first year of launch. Building a community and connecting graduate students to each other will foster stronger collaboration for future research projects and strengthen AAAE membership.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

Developing this poster is a small drop in the bucket compared to what we aim to accomplish in the future. Our experience together has illuminated the need for continued collaboration between graduate students, especially GSPs. More importantly, we realized the need to draw back the curtain on the GSP experience. Our next step will involve acquiring a list of all graduate students within the American Association for Agricultural Education and identifying the student members from our respective universities who consider themselves GSPs to understand how many students (and arguably, their families) are affected by the GSP experience. Following this, our team will conduct an autoethnographic study by journaling our personal experiences as GSPs and then collectively interpreting them to provide practical implications for the GSP experience.

Resources Needed

Besides having access to virtual platforms to host meetings (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams), we require no additional resources. We must recognize, however, the time and energy it costs each of us to attend our meetings. Though our meetings were limited to one hour each week for one month, they took time away from our families and responsibilities as parents.

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