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Title: Peer Wellness Coaches as Agents of Cultural Change in Academic Medical Research

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Peer Wellness Coaches as Agents of Cultural Change in Academic Medical Research

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To the Editor: Many researchers perceive the academic culture as “negative”.¹ A survey of >6,000 graduate students revealed their frustrations with career prospect uncertainty, bullying and harassment, financial struggles, work-life balance, and mental health.² Leaders in academia wonder why so many students are struggling. The problem is complex, and no single intervention will succeed in solving it.³ 

Academic medical research is driven by high achievement and funding pressures. Developing protective mechanisms against the constant bombardment of criticism and failure, which is inherent to the profession, can be challenging for graduate students. Program leaders could provide structural support, including enhanced mentoring, professional development, teaching, and service opportunities. Unfortunately, excellence in these categories is often undervalued compared to research excellence. Despite this, graduate trainees still hope for culture change. But, what if it is possible to affect academic culture as “just” a graduate student?

At Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM), our approach to culture change has been to focus on changing the immediate environment of graduate students – rather than influencing policy. Models, typically focused on undergraduates, have been developed around the concept of peer wellness coaches.⁴ Over the past 12 months, a diverse group of IUSM graduate students have implemented a peer wellness program. The peer wellness coaches (n = 11) completed training on substance abuse, mental health, sexual harassment, and suicide prevention. Training also identified university resources available to students and equipped coaches with motivational interviewing skills to help peers achieve their personal and professional goals. Peer wellness coaches are therefore able to provide one-on-one coaching; empower and assist tailored goal setting to enable healthier and satisfying lifestyle choices; provide education; and refer students to appropriate campus resources. The effectiveness and utilization of this program is still not known, but even if this program just
inspires some of the peer coaches to become wellness champions, who advocate for their fellow trainees and approach future roles and decisions with a focus on wellness, then it is a success.

References


