

XTOCK/ADOBE STOCK

Reforming Academic Culture through Self-Advocacy and Community Support

Kate Borchardt and Zee Kwong



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As researchers, we are endowed with a unique opportunity to pursue our passions while dictating our working hours and location. However, the ceaseless stressors required to maintain this independence, from publishing to grant-writing, contribute to physical and mental well-being taking a secondary role. As entomologists, we are not only part of a community in which one-third of graduate students are at risk of developing depression and anxiety, but we are also constantly risking our physical health through fieldwork (Levecque et al. 2017). Activities such as setting up research sites, hiking through the wilderness, and dealing with dangerous insects can result in serious injuries and illnesses. The toll of these dangers and the necessity for change are exemplified through the experiences of two students, Zee Kwong and Kate Borchardt.

Zee Kwong, an undergraduate, has struggled with the weight of this stress. Throughout his education, he has always approached stress with a head-down mentality, solely focusing on the task at hand

and tuning out anything that could be a distraction. Although this approach was sufficient for transient stressors like tests and projects, it began to crumble under the unrelenting stress of academia. The shortcomings of this mentality first became apparent when taking a break became a burden. Breaks turned from a space for relaxation to a swirl of anxious thoughts of falling behind on a mountain of uncompleted tasks. Eventually, this culminated in skipping breaks altogether. From peer conversations and observations, he realized that these sentiments are not only symptoms of a larger mental health crisis, but are predecessors of burnout and exhaustion.

Societal shifts are needed to support students' mental health. Long hours in the field and lab with few breaks have been the expectation of students for countless decades. How can we begin reforming this mentality at the individual level? It is critical to first recognize that stress-coping techniques are highly individualized, and determining which ones maximize learning and long-term stress management requires a combination of space, support, and advocacy. For Zee, this has taken the form of reframing his perceptions of breaks by valuing them as equally important to his research. Longer breaks are directly scheduled into his calendar to ensure that they are taken and that no other event can supersede them. For shorter breaks, Zee strives to make rest physically distinct, while also utilizing methods such as the Pomodoro technique (25 minutes of focus and 5-minute breaks) to build in formal breaks. These changes have been critical to establishing a healthy balance between work and life, while also sustaining research passions throughout his career.

Advocating for one's own health is crucial; however, building a community of support can help overcome health issues



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with legal and university barriers. While the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) upholds that paid students (both graduate and undergraduate) at private universities are employees of the university, many public universities use loopholes in state law to deny these legal protections to public university students doing the same work as their private university counterparts. Included among the many benefits that may be denied is workers' compensation for injury or illness.

Kate Borchardt, a graduate student, experienced first-hand the physical dangers of entomology and their repercussions when she developed a life-threatening allergy while on a research assistantship for honey-bee research. While previous lab members who developed allergies on assistantships had immunotherapy treatment covered by workers' compensation as recently as 2015, Kate's claim was denied, along with free student legal help and support from her university's administration, in 2021. Even though several faculty members advocated for the university to help with the financial coverage of Kate's treatment, many were punished by the university administration. Both the university and state government told Kate to "be her own advocate" and told her, "You're smart—you can just do something else with your life," despite Kate spending the previous eight years researching and working with bees. Kate was left to either pay out of pocket, find a lawyer, or sue her university for negligence while continuing to work towards a Ph.D. and seeking medical treatment.

The legal justification for whether a public university considers paid students to be employees is much more complicated than it seems. In Kate's state of Iowa, paid graduate assistants are employees under federal tax law and the state's public employee database, and they have the legal right to unionize and receive workers' compensation as public employees. However, universities can use skilled legal teams to work against students who must find their own legal representation independently and out of pocket. Scarily enough, this occurred in one of the fourteen states that explicitly give graduate student assistants rights such as the right to unionize (Hutchens and Hutchens 2003). However, universities

can use laws such as the 1997 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to claim that graduate student work is purely *educational* for their degree program and not work for the university, even though the university may benefit from the resulting publications and future grants and patents. Without support, afflicted graduate students may drop out and never receive their degree. Other graduate students have been splashed with acid (like Shiva Dastherdi; Lemonick 2020), mauled by cows, and sustained other injuries costing thousands of dollars in emergency bills, with no aid from the university that paid them to do their work. Often, these students cut their losses and do not pursue compensation from their university.

Prioritizing our health is critical to creating an equitable and inclusive society within the American entomological community. It is vital that we advocate for better rights and protections of graduate students and normalize mental health conversations in the lab. Without protections, these issues can escalate into financial stress, future medical burdens, and other stressors that will continue to limit diversity in the field of entomology. This disenfranchises groups that are more likely to develop medical conditions or who *cannot afford* to cover additional health expenses. For honey bee work specifically, groups more likely to develop a severe allergic reaction are women, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students who often have less capital to deal with additional medical expenses. This disenfranchisement is reflected in U.S. beekeeper demographics; they are largely white (79% as of 2019) and male (68% as of 2022)

according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Denying workers' compensation to graduate students will only continue this trend of a white- and male-dominated community into academia.

This is largely a U.S.-specific issue, as a country with a history of toxic work-life balances, laws against graduate students' rights, and no universal healthcare. While students such as Zee can be their own supporters to some extent, other issues like employee rights and injury compensation, as in Kate's experience, require the larger scientific community to support graduate students.

The entomological community must stand up to create a healthier environment for mental health and put pressure on universities and lawmakers to protect student health. Without action, more promising scientists may be lost to burnout, injuries, and other health conditions. If we want to continue increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion within the American entomological community, we must improve the culture of science and academia for the next generation of researchers.

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Zee Kwong is a fourth-year undergraduate student majoring in Biology at Emory University. His research focuses on the role of microbial interactions in the establishment of insect-microbe symbioses.

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